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Tsunehiko Watanabe

渡辺恒彦

illustration

文倉十

理想の上司

ヒーロー文庫

「ガッ……！」

「ヒッ!?」

「うわあああ!?」

兵士の身体を踏みつぶすようにして、
それらは街道にその姿を現した。
全身を緑色の鱗で覆われた、
二足歩行型の中型肉食竜。
群竜だ。

スーパーモデルもかくやという
長身の美少女、ファティマ・ギジェン。
善治郎の気を引こうとするのも、
全ては兄の命令ゆえ。

「……素晴らしいですわ」

「魔力出力調整の鍛錬を始めましょう」

オクタビア夫人による魔法の講義。
笑いかけるだけで、温かな親しみを醸し出すのだった。

一生懸命乳を飲む赤子と、赤子を抱く母親。
そして、その母と子を少し離れた所から見守る父親。
穏やかで温かな時間は、赤子がアウラの乳房から口を離すまで続いた。

「お腹いっぱい飲んだか？
そうか、お腹いっぱいか。
じゃぁ、残りは『パパの分』だな。」

理想の上七生活 3

『カルロス・善吉・カープァ』。

それがこの赤子、
カープァ王国第一王子の正式な名前だ。

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illustration 文倉 十

Prologue: Dawn of the Second Year

A certain night exactly one month after Queen Aura of the Carpa Kingdom safely gave birth to her first child. The Capital was overflowing with fires, dispelling the night, and merry glee.

Large bonfires were lit at the crossings of the main street or parks while here and there soldiers patrolled through the city at night, accompanied by valets carrying torches.

In the business district, the majority of the taverns had lit a couple of oil pans within the store and a special night business boomed.

Normally the stores wouldn't open in the middle of the night, since the light wasn't cheap and there was a good risk of the fires spreading, but today was an exception.

Because tonight was a night to be remembered, where they celebrated the news that most citizens of the Carpa Kingdom had eagerly awaited: The birth of a healthy first prince.

"To the health of Queen Aura!"

"To the birth of Prince Carlos!"

"To the future of the Carpa Kingdom!"

"Cheers!"

Shouts of joy and the sounds of wooden mugs, filled with alcohol, clashing against each other resounded through the bar at night.

The place was only illuminated by oil pans in each corner, but the atmosphere there made this dim light seem "bright" instead.

Tonight was a festival to celebrate the birth of the prince. He was actually born one month ago, but the medical treatment was undeveloped in this world, so there was no guarantee that the child would live on without problems, even if it was royalty. Therefore it was customary to celebrate the birth one month after the actual birthday.

And that one month was reached today. The Capital burned the candles at both ends.

Still, while it was true that the guests here were celebrating the birth of the prince, it was just as true that most of them were simply elated about "eating and drinking for free".

Yes, the royal family mainly shouldered the costs for illuminations, drinks and food, which arose throughout the night.

They prepared the oil or wood for the bonfires, paid the taverns up front and arranged for soldiers to patrol, so that no fires or fights would occur.

The financial burden was nothing to be sneezed at, since the royal family was still rebuilding the war damages, but neither could they ignore a celebration like this. Besides, a subsidiary outcome could be expected as well: a temporary boom in the economy in the capital.

Although the royal family was catering "free drinks and food", it was limited to cheap fruit wine and a cheap soup, which was made in a cauldron all at once.

One could get drunk on that wine and stuff one's stomach with the soup, but the alcohol made a few people generous enough to order better wine or food against their better judgement, paying for it with their own money.

In the end, the taverns were operating quite in the black, even if the sponsoring from the royal family wasn't counted.

"Man, I gotta say, lately it's one good thing after another. First we won the war, then Queen Aura got married. And now a year later, a prince is born. Too good to be true."

A corpulent man, sitting on a chair inside the bar with spread legs, declared that with a loud voice and heavily pounded his empty mug onto the table. The wooden mug made a melodic sound as it hit the wooden table.

“Nonsense! We had a tough time during the long war, so the ‘good things’ piled up and now come up altogether.”

The one, who replied like that, was a man sitting across from him. That man was relatively slender compared to the man in front of him, but on a closer look, one could tell that his body was firm and trained from manual labour. Most likely, the two of them were doing some kind of physical labour in the capital.

The slender man scooped the piping hot soup with a large wooden spoon and brought it to his mouth.

The soup only consisted of chunks of plantain, cheap leaf vegetables and a token amount of meat from a disused dragon (meaning meat from raptorial or hulking dragons that were no longer deployable due to old age), but it was strongly flavoured with salt and spices, so it was plenty delicious when eaten warm.

Salt, spice and brown sugar. All of these weren’t expensive goods in the Carpa Kingdom, so the entire cuisine here had a strong flavour, even in the cooking of the commoners.

A common way to overcome the brutal heat in the Carpa Kingdom was to sweat by slurping some spicy soup and to replenish the sweated share by drinking during the heat.

“Well, yeah. That war was one helluva fight. Can’t blame us when a few good things keep happening now.”

The sturdy man agreed with the slender man. They were around their mid-thirties and a closer look revealed that their arms or chests, peeking out of their clothes, were covered with scars that seemed to stem from a sword or arrow. Considering their age, they most likely had been soldiers in the previous war and experienced the horror of war.

By that logic, it was only natural that these two men sounded so emotional.

“Right. Still, if they’re going to serve free wine and food, I wish they would’ve done so from noon on. Half a day’s wasted. Well, the night’s its charm, too.”

Saying so, the slender man put the spoon back into the wooden plate with soup and the sturdy man replied with a burst of laughter.

“Hah! ‘Its charm’? Talking big now, huh? Well, not that I can’t relate. Children are a windfall. You can’t control when they’re born.”

Normally, the birth of a prince would be celebrated for a whole day, but unfortunately it was currently the hottest season of the year. The brutal heat with maximum temperatures of over forty degrees threatened the vigour of the body.

People would die or faint one after another when they raised their glasses to the prosperity of the county amidst temperatures that far exceeded the body temperature. In this season with the lasting heat, people stayed indoors and avoided efforts as much as possible. And when they absolutely had to go outside, they had to cover themselves with a hooded cloak, not exposing the slightest part of their bodies directly to the sunlight.

The cloak was principally made out of thick cotton material. Air-permeable cloth like hemp only felt freshening when the air temperature was lower than the body temperature. When the air temperature was above the body temperature, the wind could blew through the clothes as much as it wanted, but the wearer would only feel hotter each time.

By that definition, the night was indeed “cool”, since all the men, revelling in the bar, were able to dress in sleeveless shirts and thin trousers.

Nonetheless, that estimate was relative to the murderous heat during the day and the night, too, was still hot for sure.

After finishing his hot soup, the slender man fanned out his collar, but this sultry night wasn’t so innocent that doing so would make it any cooler.

“The heat’s killing me. Hey, I’m gonna splash some water, ‘kay?”

At the end of his limit, the slender man turned around on his chair and reached out for the wooden ladle leaning against the wall behind him while he said that with a voice loud enough to resound through the whole bar.

“Sure, go ahead!”

“Yeah, it’s friggin’ hot!”

“Nobody’s gonna stop ya!”

All guests in the tavern expressed their approval at once

“Good, here goes nothing.”

Having gotten the consent from the others, the man stood up from his chair, then headed for the long and narrow water bucket, which was standing in the corner of the room, with the big ladle in hand.

All the shops around here that were directly dealing with customers made it a customer service to place a water bucket within the store.

The room temperature was lowered a bit just from having the bucket there and when someone splashed the water from it onto the floor, just like the man was about to do now, then its vaporization chilled down the room considerably.

Of course the water temporarily accumulated in the hollows of the stone paving and sometimes sprinkled onto the shoes or hem of the trousers of the guests, but no one here was so narrow-minded to be bothered by that.

A bit of water like that dried in no time in face of this temperature, which was still over thirty-five degree in the middle of the night.

On the contrary, one male customer said.

“Oh, splash all you want. Or might as well send it flying!”

Send it flying.

In other words, he was saying that he should amply spray the water over their heads instead of sparsely splash it to their feet.

Splashing water onto the ground for a chilling aside, the act of sloshing around water directly over their heads inside a store was a somewhat crude behaviour, even in the Carpa Kingdom. However, this was a tavern on the outskirts. The crude suggestion was welcomed with a hurricane of applause.

“Yeah, do it!”

“At this rate I’m gonna dry up!”

“Hold it! Wait until we cover our food!”

The water “shower” seemed to get common, since everyone was versed in covering their soup plates and lightly baked bread on the table.

As to substantiate it, the shopkeeper, keeping an eye on the cauldron behind his counter, also made no attempts to stop them and just showed a wry smile on his frowned, brown face.

Quite the opposite,

“Be careful not to hit the oil pans.”

he permitted it with these words.

Hearing that, the man grinned broadly, saying “got it”, and plunged the tip of the ladle into the square water bucket. Then,

“Okay, brace yourselves. Ready, go!”

He swung the filled ladle in a wide arc with his right hand and let it rain over the bar at night.

The water drops, flying around through the air, sparkled shiny as they were illuminated by the fire on the oil pans in the four corners of the room.

“Oh, so refreshing!”

“Hyah, I’m back to life!”

“Don’t be so stingy with it. C’mon, more!”

The drinkers said arbitrary and unanimously.

“Aw, shuddap. Gimme a sec.”

The man refreshed himself by pouring the water he had scooped with the ladle over his head, then rapidly scattered water throughout the store by swinging the ladle over and over again.

“Fuh, feels good! Long live the Queen!”

“Yep, long live Prince Carlos!”

“Long live the Carpa Kingdom!”

Feeling better from the shower, the guests erupted with joy once again.

“And while we’re at it, ehm, huh? What was his name again? …Anyway, long live Queen Aura’s husband!”

Apparently “Zenjirou’s” name recognition as Queen Aura’s husband was so low that the common folk in the outskirts couldn’t remember his name when their ability to think was dulled by the alcohol.

* * *

A new morning was breaking.

The festival with alcohol and flames ended after a single night.

As soon as the scorching sun appeared over the horizon, business took place as usual.

Especially now during the hottest season of the year. The time period, where the morning sun was raising and spent light without skyrocketing the temperature yet, was quite valuable.

In the streets of the capital at dawn, people were already full of life and taking up their work.

To avoid a heatstroke in this season, it was customary to preserve one’s stamina by taking a midday nap indoors during the time of the day, where the temperature was on the rise the most. Therefore they had to get done as much as possible during the morning and evening or they would be running out of time.

A bustling, but lively morning in the Capital. Although the inner palace stood in the heart of that very Capital, his room was the only place that had nothing to do with that bustle and Zenjirou greeted a calm morning like any other day.

Zenjirou greatly stretched himself in the room, which looked chaotic on a glance and had classic furniture in an exotic style combined with mass-produced electronic appliances from Japan.

The only light source was the sunrays that came through the gap of the closed wooden window shutters, so a darkness beyond dim spread over the interior.

“Fuh… Kuh…!”

Wearing indoor dress consisting of a white shirt and twin pleat, hemp trousers in black, he stretched his arms upwards and opened the window in the living room while craning his neck.

Once the window, ornamented with detailed carvings, was opened, stifling air and sunlight so strong that it seemed unlikely it came from the morning sun, found their way inside.

“Uwah!?”

Faced with the mighty light and aggressive heat invading after opening the window, Zenjirou unconsciously turned his face away. As his eyes had been used to the darkness, the bright sunlight stung them, but the heat was even more intense.

“Wow. It feels more like my life’s in danger than hot or gross.”

He instinctively said that with a serious face.

Breathing this excessively hot air felt as suffocating as air with low oxygen concentration, even with a full deep breath.

This living room, where he usually spent his time, and the bedroom next door were cooled down by the ventilator and water buckets around-the-clock.

Since the small prince, sleeping in a different room, got the prior claim on the ice recently, the temperature in the living room tended to be a bit higher than before, but compared to the outside, there was a difference as wide as between heaven and earth and thus still comfortable.

Zenjirou frowned in response to the stream of hot air, merciless coming in through the open window, and quickly took the tools, so he could get the task over with and shut the window again as soon as possible.

He fetched three things from the corner of the living room: A digital table clock, a mechanical pencil and a digital camera.

“Good, I’m right on time.”

Placing the rectangle clock on the window frame, he then looked at the display of the camera and nodded short.

A small, needle-like nail stood vertically in the centre of the frame.

While keeping a watch on both, the tiny shadow cast by the nail and the digital clock, he silently waited for the right moment.

“…Now!”

7:00

As soon as the liquid crystals in the table clock displayed that time, Zenjirou drew a line with the mechanical pencil by tracing over the shadow line on the window frame.

Then he took a photo of that shape with the digital camera shortly after. The shutter sound rang out after the typical short time-lag for a digital camera, whereupon the integrated clock of the camera displayed 7:00:09.

This had become a daily morning routine for him these days.

“Hmm, there’s a small discrepancy after all. The problem is, I can’t judge whether the discrepancy is due to the fact that ‘a day hasn’t exactly twenty-four hours’ or that ‘the time for sunset and sunrise changes every day’.”

He mumbled while looking at the screen of the digital camera. This routine was only a few days old, but every day, he was drawing the same shadow line at the same time, yet the line shifted slightly to the side every day.

It was his second year in this different world after transferring here. Now that he had fulfilled his greatest duty, namely making a child with Aura, Zenjirou started to settle down enough to show an interest in the different world bit by bit.

This matter, too, was something he had decided to investigate at long last now.

Namely: “How does the calendar work in this world?”

“Well, the clocks from Earth still are applicable even now after a year without tuning, so it’s certain that one day has as good as twenty-four hours either way.”

He muttered to himself like that.

If that weren’t the case, the clocks he had brought with him would no longer be useful by now. For example, even if a day was only longer by a single minute, it would account for a discrepancy of three-hundred and sixty-five minutes when projected to three-hundred and sixty-five days. To make it easier to understand: Three-hundred and sixty-five minutes amounted to roughly six hours.

If the time were to be deviated by whole six hours, he would’ve noticed it for sure, even if he only had a vague reference like the sunrise and sunset. In other words, it could be concluded that the discrepancy in the

period of one day between his original world and this world was something so extremely small that he was unable to perceive it even over roughly one year, if there was one at all. However.

“Ignoring the discrepancy in dates, I could measure the discrepancy of one day, if I record the position of the shadow exactly one year later, but… the problem is, I don’t even have the guarantee that one year has three-hundred and sixty-five days here.”

Zenjirou sighed once again.

The calendar of this world had a total of twelve months from which six months had twenty-nine days and the other six had thirty days. In short, a year had three-hundred and fifty-four days. However, that apparently caused an obvious discrepancy, so they regulated that by adding an intercalary month every couple of years, making it a year with thirteen months.

Thus it seemed that one year in this world had more or less three-hundred and sixty-five days on an average, too, according to a quick calculation he had made on the aforementioned calendar.

“If I could somehow be sure that this world has the same 24/365 allocation as Earth, I would be able to make a few useful suggestions.”

Zenjirou closed the wooden shutters while he grumbled like that.

Of course he had no intention to change the current calendar, which the citizen were used to, for his own convenience.

But if he succeeded in making a somewhat accurate solar calendar, it would definitely be useful in various ways.

The current calendar caused a discrepancy of about thirty days, since it added an intercalary month every few years.

Considering that the first day of the fourth month last year could become the first day of the fifth month this year, it was obvious just how pointless it was to hope for this calendar to announce the “seasons”. At least it was extremely unsuitable for marking the time when they had to sow or do embankment work.

Due to that, the periods for sowing and harvesting were currently all based on the experience and intuition of the farmers in the Carpa Kingdom.

“Hmm, it would need tens of years to collect enough data for making an estimate that could beat the experience of a veteran farmer. And this world has no thermometers either.”

Nevertheless, the creation of an accurate calendar and the gathering of weather data throughout the year along with it, should prove to be useful in some way in the future.

Telling himself that, Zenjirou turned on the six LED floor lamps and lighted the interior of the room in an artificial white light. At that very moment.

The sound from knocking on the entrance door resonated trough the wide living room.

A waiting maid would state her business right after knocking. Since that didn’t happen, it limited the list of possible people down to one.

Zenjirou looked at the clock reflexively.

“Mh? These days, she’s usually already at a meeting in the palace by this time. Oh well. Yes, come in.”

While tilting his head puzzled, he raised a voice, whereupon the door opened. Beyond it stood exactly the person, whom he expected.

“Good morning, Zenjirou.”

The tall beauty, tightly holding a small baby against her voluptuous chest like a treasure, was accompanied by two waiting maids behind her and smiled at him.

“Morning, Aura.”

Zenjirou returned the gentle smile on par with hers and beckoned his wife with their child, into the room.

“Excuse me, but is this position suitable?”

The waiting maid took a large ice block from the metal basin in the refrigerator, as she had completely gotten used to it in the past year, and positioned it next to the couches, where Zenjirou and Aura were sitting. Behind it, the ventilator sent a refreshing breeze at Zenjirou from the perfect angle.

As Aura was sitting on the couch across of him, its effect didn't reach her, but that was alright for now. She was holding their one-month old baby in her arms after all. It was not a good idea to directly blow cold air onto the sensitive skin of a baby.

“Yes, well done. You may leave.”

“Yes, excuse me.”

Keeping her gaze down on the child in her arms, Queen Aura said that, whereupon the two waiting maids, who had positioned the ice and ventilator, lowered their heads respectfully, then retreated.

After the door closed with a clatter, only the couple with their child remained in the living room.

The mother dandled the child and the father watched over her. Such a scene was ordinary all over the world, but it wasn’t all that usual for Zenjirou and Aura.

“Normally you would be at the morning meeting already at this time, so what’s up today?”

Zenjirou asked his wife, who was sitting across of him, this in the living room after the maids had left.

During the period, where the heat was especially severe in the Carpa Kingdom, even the Royal Palace issued long breaks at noon for reasons of health. To compensate for that delay even a bit, the morning meetings around this time were started earlier.

Just like Zenjirou had said, Aura would normally have no time to relax like this.

But while dandling the child in her arms, Aura

“Yes. Today’s meeting is with Marquis Guzzle. And since the crucial party is arriving late, the start of the meeting has to be postponed.”

happily replied like that.

“Oh, I see. That’s great. Wait, can I say it like that?”

“Not great at all. The agenda was merely delayed, not resolved, so it is rather troubling instead. But it is a rare free time and it would be a waste to not use it effectively. Right, Carlos?”

Aura showed a wry smile for a moment, but right afterwards, she resumed her broad smile and said that, peeking at the face of the child in her arms.

“Ah, Ahh!”

The one-month old baby— Carlos looked up to his mother’s face and laughed happily.

The image of “looking like a skinny monkey”, which Zenjirou had when he was born, had completely vanished and the young prince was growing steadily by sucking milk from his mother or wet nurse. His cheeks and arms, peeking out of the sleeves of his baby clothes, also had become cute and chubby. Altogether he was overflowing with an adorableness that involuntarily made you want to nudge him.

Curly hair in a glossy olive brown tone. A big pair of black wide eyes. Skin coloured in a mixture of brown and yellow. ‘My parental bias aside, could it be that he’s the most adorable being in this world?’ Zenjirou was actually thinking that for real, but he was the only one, who didn’t realize that his opinion couldn’t be biased any more, seeing as he especially added “parental bias aside”.

“Carlos~? Lookie, lululu…Bleeh!”

“Ahh? Kyakya!”

Looking at the face of his father, who was playing the fool by sticking out his tongue from the opposite couch, the infant starred blankly for a moment, then raised a shrill voice for joy.

As he liked the reaction of his son, Zenjirou then repeated it over and over and over again.

“Oh, he laughed. Am I funny? Lookie, lululu… Bleeh! Lulululu, Bleeh!”

“Kyakya, Kyakya!”

The baby continued to laugh happily, but the mother, who was holding him, contributed a complain with a wry smile.

“Zenjirou, I can relate that you want to make Carlos laugh, but please stop doing these ‘weird faces’ one after another. As your wife I cannot help but feel sad about it, even if I am his mother.”

“U… Ugh.”

For a moment, Zenjirou wanted to object with “what’s the point of putting on airs at this point?”, but when he looked at it the other way around, he could understand Aura’s standpoint a bit, too.

Even if it was for the sake of making the most adorable life-form from both worlds— Carlos laugh, Zenjirou definitely would demand her to stop, too, if his beloved wife were to let her lips vibrate snorting or were sticking out her tongue so far that it could reach the tip of her nose or chin.

Politeness is not just for strangers.

A proverb he mustn’t forget, even if their relationships as a “married couple” remained perfectly harmonic over a long time after two actual strangers had become family now.

The Queen gave her husband, who reluctantly ceased to do “weird faces”, an affectionate gaze, which differed from the one she was giving their child, and said in slightly teasing manner.

“Besides, why are you calling our child like that? ‘Carlos’ is not his only name. You are the only one, who can make the correct pronunciation for his ‘other name’, so should you not be calling him by that name?”

Zenjirou was a bit taken by surprise by the words of this wife and showed that on his face, but nodded.

“Ah, yeah, right.”

Their child certainly had another name. A Japanese name that Zenjirou had given him. It was a lot less known in the world than the name “Carlos”, but he had chosen the name for that very reason. After all, this name definitely made up a part of their child, too.

“…Zenkichi.”

After taking a deep breath, Zenjirou called the name in a whisper, as if breathing only a little bit of the air that brimmed his lungs, out.

Zenkichi.

The second name for his child that he had come up with after a lot of consideration.

Due to the simple idea of keeping the first Chinese character of his own name, he had suggested relatively common names like Yoshihiko or Yoshito at first, but the people of the Carpa Kingdom, Aura included, didn’t know about the culture of “ideograms”, so it was extremely difficult to explain that one and the same character could be either read as Zen or Yoshi.

In the end, he had given his son the name Zenkichi.

“Carlos Zenkichi Carpa”

That was the official name of this baby, the first prince of the Carpa Kingdom.

Carlos was a relatively common name in the Carpa Kingdom. At least two former kings and ten or more people, counting the royalty that hadn’t become king by reference to the family register, have had the same name, so some people called the new prince as “His Highness Carlo-Zen”, shortening his two names.

It was also possible that he would be called “His Majesty King Carlo-Zen” in the future. But then, “Prince Carlos” was mainly used amongst the common folk, so it was quite likely that he would simply be called “Carlos III”.

Meanwhile, the little prince suddenly contorted his smiling face and cried woefully.

“Fuah… Fuah… Fueeeh…”

“Oh, what’s wrong? Zenkichi? Carlos? Carlo? What’s up?”

Half-rising from the couch, Zenjirou called out to him worried, but his wife

“No, everything is alright, Zenjirou. This cry means he is hungry.”

answered without any agitation.

“Ah, I see.”

He made a sigh of relief upon his wife’s assurance, then asked something he had suddenly realized.

“Mh? But I’m surprised you can tell, Aura. Don’t tell me you can differentiate whether he’s hungry or soiled his diaper from his crying?”

The Queen nodded to her husband's question.

"Indeed. Cassandra taught it to me the other day. Although I cannot do it as well as her, since she can tell whether it is number one or number two from the crying."

She mentioned the name of the wet nurse, who was usually taking care of their child.

Nursing a child was such a demanding task that it was incongruously with the exhausting work of a Queen. After all, a baby was a little tyrant, who wants milk, relieves itself and cries when these two desires aren't satisfied, all day without regard for others. Even Aura with all her toughness would undoubtedly collapse after five days if she were to raise the child with her own hands while still fulfilling her duties as a Queen.

Nonetheless, from Cassandra's point of view, it was surprisingly easy to take care of Carlos, seeing as she had three children herself.

That didn't mean that Carlos was a good boy, who didn't need any special attention. Rather it was thanks to all the goods like baby bottles or freezer Tupperware for breast milk, which Zenjirou had brought with him from his world.

The breast milk, milked from the breasts during the day, was perfectly safe to use for around another day, too, when kept cold, so the wet nurse was relieved from the task to have to wake up to breast-feed the baby when it cried in the middle of the night, since it could be fed the stored breast milk, warmed to body temperature, with the baby bottle.

When the wet nurse was tired or extremely sleepy, one of the waiting maids could just fed the baby with the bottle in her stead.

Luckily enough, Carlos was a good sucker, so he could drink the milk from the wet nurse's breasts, from Aura's breasts or even from the baby bottle without problems.

"Well then, time to breast-feed. Zenjirou, as you can see, my hands are occupied, so could you please get behind me and untie the strap of my dress?"

"Yeah, sure."

Upon her request, Zenjirou quickly went around the couch she was sitting on. The lukewarm air felt gross on his skin, since he left the sphere of action from the ventilator, but now wasn't the time to worry about that.

To satisfy his child's hunger as soon as possible, he stood behind his wife, who had her red hair tied up, on the couch and reached out for her shoulders.

Right now, Aura was wearing a red dress without sleeves, where the front and back were tied together over her shoulders.

"Aura, tilt your head a bit to the side."

"Mm, like this?"

Aura obediently inclined her head to the right, whereupon Zenjirou reached out for her right left shoulder from behind and untied the strap there.

Normally it was tied more firmly, but right now it was just a simple butterfly knot. She probably had anticipated to breast-feed here form the beginning.

One side of her dress gently slipped down and exposed one of Aura's big breasts.

"Thanks. Here, Carlos, milk."

With one breast bared, the Queen promptly brought her voluminous breast closer to her child's face.

"Fueeeh…. Fuaah? Ada…"

The baby's reaction was dramatic.

With his mother's breast right in front of him, the infant started to feast with all his might by sucking on the nipple right away.

"Mm… Mmm… Mm…"

"Fufu, look at him sucking. He really is an energetic one."

Aura looked down at her child, who was sucking on her breast, which had gotten even bigger than before due to the pregnancy, with a truly affectionate gaze while holding him firmly.

“Good. He must have been really hungry.”

Once he confirmed that Carlos had stopped crying, Zenjirou sat down on the other couch again.

“Mm, Mh, Mm, Mmm…”

“…..”

“…..”

The baby was drinking milk with all its might while the mother held it. And the father was watching over them from a bit apart.

At some point, the parents had fallen silent and just fondly gazed upon their child.

“Eat your fill. Now is the only time I can give you milk today.”

Aura unconsciously let these words come out of her mouth. As Aura was a Queen before she was a mother, she had few chances to breast-fed her child herself.

“…BURP.”

The peaceful and heart-warming scene lasted until the baby removed his mouth from Aura’s breasts.

“Mh? What is the matter? Done already?”

Just to be sure, Aura brought her breast closer to his mouth once more, but he averted his face to the side. It seemed that he had eaten his fill.

Zenjirou, too, couldn’t help but make a gentle smile when he saw his child with drool and milk around his mouth. However, this gentle expression of his crumbled upon Aura’s next words.

“Did you drink your fill? I see, you are full. Then the rest is ‘for Papa’.”

“Papa won’t drink it, you know!? Mama, stop making scandalous jokes in front of Zenkichi!”

Zenjirou resolutely objected with a frantic expression in front of the mother dandling the sleepy baby.

Chapter 01: The Incident on the Salt Road

“What? The salt is not being delivered?”

After hearing the complaint at the morning meeting, Aura raised one eyebrow and inquired again in a serious tone while remaining seated on her throne.

She was in a small room at the very heart of the royal palace.

The only window of the room, through which the sunrays shone in, was positioned far higher up than a person’s height and barred, so the interior was wrapped in dimness, It regularly hosted important discussions, which decided the Kingdom’s future.

An imposing and long table stood in the centre of the relative small, square room and various wooden chairs were arranged around it.

As the Queen, Aura naturally sat at the short head of the table. Secretary Fabio stood at attention behind her and was merely allowed to be present, but not to sit down, much less to speak up.

The only people, who were allowed to speak up in this place, were these with the title of either a “minister” or “general”.

“Elaborate, Marquis Guzzle.”

Addressed by Aura, the man sitting little short of the opposite of the table, stood up with the short exclamation “very well”.

Marquis Guzzle was past his middle age. His skin was rather brown, even for a citizen of the Carpa Kingdom, and wrinkled from age here and there, but one could tell from his smooth movement as he stood up from the chair, or from his stout neck that he kept the senility away through harsh training even now.

Vigorous despite his age, the experienced soldier reported with a low voice that complied with his corpulent physique, which had a close resemblance to a rugby player.

“The day before yesterday, a ‘small flying dragon’ reached me from my son, whom I left in charge of the march. It said that the current salt supply still had not arrived seven days after the arranged time. The stock in the region will last for another three months. As my deputy, my son requests to be allowed to send our army to the ‘Salt Road’ and probe the cause of it.

And if I may add, I agree with him.”

After he had finished his concise report with a fluent way of speaking, Marquis Guzzle sat down again with the same smooth movement untypical for his age as when he stood up.

The March of Guzzle was a domain that bordered on another country. As the domain had no coasts, nor underground rock salt deposits, the essential salt had to be imported from elsewhere. The ‘Salt Road’ referred to a “state road”, which a previous King had decreed some generations before, so that the enormous amount of required salt could be transported trouble-free to all the domains within the Kingdom.

Accordingly, Marquis Guzzle’s statement didn’t meet with full approval.

“I object. Of course it’s a serious matter that the salt isn’t delivered to your domain and I have no objections to send soldiers out to ensure the safety on the road. However, that’s not a responsibility for your army, but rather for the royal army.”

The one, who opposed downright aggressively like that, was General Puyol.

Amongst the assembled people here, General Puyol was the youngest member after Queen Aura as he was in his early thirties, but even though the Marquis could be his father age-wise, he wasn’t the least bit daunted and openly stated his own opinion.

And his notion was by no means wrong.

The “Salt Road” was a state road, so sending out troops to maintain its security basically fell within the scope of the royal army.

However, Marquis Guzzle showed no signs to back off, either.

“Yes, you’re right, General Puyol. I, too, acknowledge that the ‘Salt Road’ belongs to the Kingdom. But taking prior incidents into account, I would say it’s quite likely that the cause for the delay in the salt transport is the increase in numbers of the ‘Meat Dragons’ appearing alongside the road.

In that case, it’s necessary to send soldiers to the forest and grassland around the road and kill the meat dragons that attack people. And as it happens, that forest and grassland belong to my domain.”

Reasoning with this theory of his, he took on the young general’s gaze head-on.

“…..”

“…..”

Aura watched how the young and aged military officers openly glare at each other face to face, which was a rare occurrence amongst confrontations between higher nobles, from her seat and sighed inwardly while she outwardly kept her composure.

(How troublesome. Although it is nothing new that the feudal landowners are reluctant about letting the royal army into their domains and neither is it surprising that Puyol Guillèn wants to march out with the army for some achievements…)

Lost in thought, Aura recalled the fact that Marquis Guzzle had lost two of his sons in the previous war.

His eldest son, a candidate for succeeding him, and his second son, who had made a name for himself on the battlefield, had fallen in battle.

The “son”, who was currently acting as his proxy at home, ought to be his third and only living son. She had heard that he was born rather late and wasn’t even in his twenties yet.

Considering that, it made sense that the Marquis insisted upon settling this case with his own army.

(Most likely, he wants his son to get an ‘achievement fit for a heir’ in a relatively harmless incident.)

When the failed delivery of the salt was indeed caused by “Meat Dragons” on the road, like the Marquis assumed, then their subjugation wasn’t all that difficult.

An escort of abnormal size for a merchant accompanied the salt merchants, who were practically a public undertaking, but even so, their combat power was nothing but brittle and paled in comparison to the army.

It was pretty unlikely that the army of the Marquis would be defeated by wild dragons, even if it was led by his third son, who had nearly no combat experience.

In short, it was a “beneficial” obstacle spot-on for someone who sought achievements.

As a matter of course, it was all based on their assumed premise that the average meat dragon was the cause for the non-delivery of the salt, but the circumstantial evidences pointed to it, too.

Aura mused for a while.

The merit and demerit from leaving this case to the army of the Marquis. And the merit and demerit from dispatching the royal army for it.

She quickly balanced the minimum profits and losses in her head and called out to the glaring officers with a resolute voice from the side.

“Alright, Marquis Guzzle.”

“Yes.”

Upon the Queen’s words, the veteran officer immediately took his eyes off General Puyol to look at Aura and lowered his head respectfully.

Looking at the top of his head that started to go bald, the Queen continued with a flat voice.

“I shall accept your proposal. Solve this incident under your jurisdiction. Once you do so commendable, I shall reward you appropriately for your service.”

Her assertion also equalled that “she would pay for everything later, including all necessity expenses, but he would have to assume responsibility for when he failed”. Still, Marquis Guzzle considered it as a complete granting of his important request.

“Yes, as you command! I will not fail you.”

As the veteran officer lowered his head in obedience, Aura kept her arms crossed under her chest and nodded acknowledging, then

“Good. Ah, one more thing, I personally will bestow the reward to your son for his achievement. He will have to come to the capital, so bear that in mind.”

she added in a casual tone.

On the other hand, Marquis Guzzle couldn’t keep his composure after being told that. He trembled his body with a shiver and reflexively wrinkled the space between his thick eyebrows.

Well, it was more than understandable.

The Queen’s intention was obvious. The “reward” wasn’t a symbolic medal or the like. It also involved the subsequent payment of all the accumulated expenses for resources used during the subjugation and wages for the soldiers. It would normally take a few months of negotiations to arrive at an agreement for this enormous amount of “reward” money, if not more than half a year.

Due to that, Marquis Guzzle’s son would have to stay in the capital for a few months to around half a year.

Aura’s aim must have been to cultivate his sense of belonging to the Kingdom by inviting him to the capital while he was still young, seeing as the nobles from remote regions had a strong sense of independence.

Nevertheless, the royal family was extremely powerful in the Carpa Kingdom, so it was by no means a bad deal to establish a link to the royal family, even for the nobility of a rural domain. If anything, it was essential to preserve the family.

The problem was the right dosage. Not too close to be swallowed by the royal family, but not too distant to be alienated by the royal family. That a boy still in his teens would have such a delicate sensibility was inconceivable, even to the biased eyes of a father.

However, the concern about it wasn’t so profound that he would complicate matters here by refusing the Queen’s proposition.

Besides, it lowered the chances of Aura grudging them the reward payment, when she tried to influence his son. And since the domain was still recovering from the previous war, that was rather welcome.

Marquis Guzzle quickly collected his thoughts.

“…Understood. There surely is a lot my son can learn in the capital. Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness.”

In the end, he replied like that and lowered his head respectfully.

* * *

While Queen Aura was making important decisions at the morning meeting, Zenjirou, left alone in the inner palace, was typing on his keyboard of his computer in the corner of the living room while the fan blew around a cold breeze.

“Good, that should do.”

Sitting on the chair, he put his hands together and stretched his arms over his head to relax his body.

The screen of the computer displayed the spreadsheet software program from his salaryman days.

A stack of dragon skin parchment he had gotten from Aura laid untidy on the left side of the keyboard. It was the table for the “tax yield of this year“.

For a few days, he had continued to enter the data into the spreadsheet and today he finally finished the task.

All that was left now was to reread the whole thing at least three time in search for any mistakes, but it was a good point to pause for now.

After craning his neck and taking a deep breath, Zenjirou looked at the digitalized tax table again.

“That’s a lot of red though…”

Just like in the previous case, the blue colour on the spreadsheet symbolized “a number with error by surplus”, whereas the red colour symbolized “a number with error by shortfall”. A lot of red numbers indicated that the reported tax yields were often too little compared to the estimated yield.

Of course some cases were simple cases of miscalculations, but the majority was a deliberate adulteration.

“Mm, might as well make it easier to understand.”

Looking at the screen, he implemented an idea that he had suddenly thought of.

It was nothing complicated. Right next to the amount of the tax yields from the dragonskin parchment and the amount of the tax yields recalculated by the program, he simply added a row that displayed the difference between the two values and when that difference was over ten percent, it showed a clearly distinguishable ▲ symbol.

The task was done in no time. He wrote a simple function into one cell and then clicked the right bottom corner of the cell with the mouse and dragged it down to the very bottom of the spreadsheet, whereupon the function was copied to all the cells in the vertical row.

Looking at the newly displayed data, Zenjirou knitted his eyebrows and groaned.

“Uwah, still so many ▲, even though I narrowed it down. Fudging more than ten percent can‘t be shrugged off as a simple miscalculation or careless mistake anymore.“

Or more precisely, the incompetence of the officials would be a far greater problem than a small mistake in the tax yields, when they “unknowingly made mistakes” over ten percent in the amount of the tax.

Last year, Aura had cracked down on it once to some degree, but apparently it hadn’t been enough to decrease the tax evasion, which had already become a routine.

“Aura sure has it tough… Wait, it’s about time I stop treating it like it doesn’t concern me.”

Zenjirou reminded himself.

One year had already passed since he came into this world and he had started to appear at official events as Aura’s proxy. He couldn’t be a “good-for-nothing sponger” forever. Although it wasn’t often, he did appear in public and plunged into higher society, so he was tied down to the obligation called social association.

Even if Aura had gotten back on the stage after safely giving birth, Zenjirou had difficulties to resume his complete shut-in lifestyle at this point.

That said, it might only be his own mentality that didn’t allow that.

To begin with, Zenjirou had spent an average life, normally attending school up to university and not causing any serious problems later in his job, either. He never really had an “aptitude to shut himself away”.

Once he had resolved to move over to this world, the leisure days after he quit his job had certainly been attractive to no end.

However, it had only been appealing to him because he had been mentally worn out at that time from the continued, knee-deep morass called overtime hell.

Although his body and soul had been exhausted by overwork for three years, Zenjirou was still only in his twenties.

The physical exhaustion completely went away after three days of rest and the mental exhaustion also naturally healed after a month away from work.

For a while, there hadn’t been any problems.

There had been various major events such as transferring into a different world, marrying a beautiful woman perfect to his liking and even making a baby with her, so time had passed in the blink of an eye.

On top of that, there was his mountainous stock of DVDs of soccer games and TV series such as dramas, which he had brought with him from the other world.

Without pretending, he had genuinely perceived the “leisure days of just sleeping, eating, watching DVD and playing games” as “fulfilling” at first.

The problem was that his values didn’t let him perceive this situation as “fulfilling” forever.

“Guess it’s about time I ask for more work. My magic studies take up a lot of my time right now, but once that’s over, I’ll have too much spare time.”

Still sitting in front of the computer, Zenjirou spoke out his state of mind.

Matters had settled down around him.

The exhaustion had completely faded from his body and soul.

Even so, things didn‘t change from before. Only a few duties were entrusted to him and his allowed area of activities was still limited.

To be frank, he had started to feel quite out of place.

In the end, Zenjirou’s value were Japanese to the core, seeing as he felt guilty about his unproductive lifestyle all on his own, even though nobody was rebuking him about it.

He wasn’t a workaholic, whose job was his reason d’être and whose calling was to be a working gear of society, but nevertheless, he wasn’t so obtuse, either, that he could unconditionally put up with the current situation, where his necessities of life were provided without having to work.

“Well, I can’t really stand out as her husband, but as long as all the official work is liaised with Aura, there’s no problem. I want to try out various things.”

At present, Zenjirou was making an effort towards the refinement of “hard liquors”.

Knowing that this world only had ale and fruit wine, which had an extremely low alcohol content, Zenjirou had brought along a distillery for household use from his world.

It used a hotplate as the heat source and automatically regulated the temperature, so even a layman could hardly fail at it.

Nevertheless, it was merely for household use after all. The amount from one distillation was little and at the present time, he could only make enough to indulge himself in it, but Aura had shown a deep interest in it.

The Carpa Kingdom had no culture of distilled beverage, but there was a number of people, who liked alcohol. Even the flat distillate made by a layman had a definite worth just due to its overwhelming concentration and intensity.

The theory behind making distilled beverage was rather simple.

The boiling point of water was approximately hundred degree. On the other hand, the boiling point of ethanol was weaker: at around eighty degree.

To sum it up with rough words: an alcoholic drink was a mixture of water and ethanol and when it was boiled for a long period at a temperature above eighty but below hundred degree, the ethanol primarily vaporized from the liquor, thus making an extraction possible.

Afterwards, the vaporized ethanol had to be gathered without letting it escape and liquefied again. The result was a liquid with an extremely high concentration of ethanol— a hard liquor.

Of course it was impossible to completely separate the water and the ethanol when a layman just relied on a thermometer to control the temperature, since the water and ethanol had a troublesome phenomenon called “azeotrope”, but by repeating the progress numerous times, the distillate gradually got a higher alcohol content.

Zenjirou himself had claimed that “the current goal was to enhance it to a burnable level”, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that he was gradually drifting away from the original objective.

Alcohol on the level, where it could be used as fuel, was not only too intense, but also tasteless and dry, so nobody would normally drink it.

Nevertheless, a highly concentrated alcohol had a great utility value, so a working refinement method would undoubtedly contribute to the Kingdom's development.

"After that, soap, I guess. Wait, no, that's still fine for now, but the shampoo and rinse are running low. I somewhat underestimated the amount a woman with long hair needs."

Deep in thought, Zenjirou was sitting in front of the computer, crossed his arms and groaned.

The majority of articles he had brought over from his world, starting with the electronic appliances, were "reusable". The quantity of consumable goods he could bring with him was rather insignificant, so it had been a natural decision.

However, despite knowing this, Zenjirou had made an exception for consumable bath utensils, bringing as much as possible of them.

Solid soap for cleaning the body. Facial cleansing. And shampoo plus rinse for washing hair.

The solid soap posed no problem. He had brought a large amount of it to begin with and since he always made sure to take the soap along when he left the bathroom after using it, so that it didn't dissolve naturally, the stock would still last for quite a while.

The pressing problem were the shampoo and rinse.

Zenjirou kept his hair rather short, even for a man, so his estimation had been rather naive in regards to how much shampoo and rinse his beloved wife would need to cleanly wash her proud, long hair that reached down to her waist.

"At this rate, the shampoo will be gone before the year is over. I technically downloaded instructions to make soap and shampoo from the internet, but…"

He had no experience of making soap, much less shampoo.

Furthermore, the recipes he found principally needed "sodium hydroxide" or "commercial soap without additives", which both were said to be unattainable in this world.

He also had a recipe for a more primitive method, which used ash and oil, but judging by the overall nuance of it, the production seemed more difficult compared to using "sodium hydroxide".

In addition to that, the soap made in that way couldn't be used right away after its completion.

There was also no insignificant amount of confirmed cases of a layman making soap with half-baked knowledge, where the detergence was too strong and dried out the skin or unforeseen components got mixed in and caused pain or itching.

Nonetheless, Zenjirou wasn't willing to compromise as far as the bath was concerned, even though he usually avoided to be demanding.

"I'll use the first attempt to clean my hands and see how it turns out. And I'll test the shampoo on some animals first… wait, that's no good. The livestock here are all reptiles and don't have any fur…"

While mumbling troubled to himself, his voice got tinged with a serious tone, which was pretty much never heard from him.

* * *

Aura still had more work to do after the morning meeting.

The meeting concluded and she relocated into her office in the palace, bringing only Secretary Fabio with her.

"…Fuh."

Sitting down on the chair made out of vines and wood, which could be called a temporary throne, in the office, Aura made a big sigh to relieve herself of the tension.

She held the belief that as a Queen, she was used to negotiations and coordinations with higher nobles, but she still felt a bit drained in body and soul when she was making important decisions, which involved "dispatching an army" like this time.

However, as the Queen, she was in no position to leisurely wait until her exhaustion had softened.

"Fabio, draw up a paper."

Aura corrected her seating posture, took a dragonskin parchment out of the drawer of the desk and ordered the secretary like that.

"Yes. Please give me a moment."

Taking that parchment, Secretary Fabio headed to his personal desk in the corner of the room with smooth steps and skilfully ran the dragon bone quill over the paper.

"….."

The veteran secretary drew up the document in no time and returned to Aura with the just finished draft in hand.

"There you are, Your Highness. Please sign it after verifying it."

Saying so, Fabio placed the newly written document onto Aura's desk.

The contents written on the dragonskin parchment pertained to "the approval of the military operation in the domain for the army of Marquis Guzzle, the order to investigate the incident on the salt road as well as the order to eliminate its cause."

By handing this document to Marquis Guzzle, he obtained the lawful authority to send his own army onto the "Salt Road", which was formally stated-owned land, and the right to demand a "reward for settling the incident" from the Kingdom later on.

"…Looks good."

After Aura had read through the whole paper twice and confirmed that there was nothing wrong, she put her sign at the bottom with her ball pen, versed as always.

The crest of the Carpa Royal Family (an opened door + a hourglass, where the sand was flowing upwards) was branded onto the parchment from the start, so Aura just had to sign there with her own hand-writing to make it an official document.

Needless to say, these pre-branded parchments were strictly safekept and anyone, who took one without Aura's permission, got the death penalty as a matter of principle.

"Well then, Your Highness, shall I deliver the document to Marquis Guzzle now?"

Secretary Fabio asked verifying, whereat Aura shook her head at once.

"No, that would take too much time. An incident on the Salt Road is a serious matter for our Kingdom. I personally will 'send off' the document along with the messenger. Tell Marquis Guzzle that he shall select a messenger from his subordinates."

She was going to send the messenger with the document directly to the March of Guzzle with her "teleportation" magic.

Being able to do that was one of the fortes of the Carpa Kingdom. A different country would have had to circumvent the blocked Salt Road by transporting the document through a relay of raptorial dragons or in the worst case, break through the blocked road with a sufficient escort (definitely can't use a "small flying dragon" for an official document).

As a major power with vast lands, the Carpa Kingdom could exceptionally keep the power of the feudal lords in the border domains in check to a certain extent, because of this very "teleportation" magic.

Likewise, if the incident this time had happened in a different country, then the usual pattern was that Marquis Guzzle would have dispatched his army at his own discretion and reported only the results to the central government at a later time after informally taking care of it.

Just as the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell ruled the country under the premise of the “Magic Tools” from the Sharrow Family and the “Healing Magic” from the Jilbell Family, the Carpa Kingdom, too, was constituting itself under the premise of the “Space-Time Magic”.

Going by that, it should be understandable why it was seen as problematic that Queen Aura was currently the only practitioner of the “Space-Time Magic”. In the same way it was only natural that concubine offers were persistently brought up to Zenjirou, who had a latent potential for the said power.

“Very well. I will inform the Marquis accordingly. However, is that really all right?”

Bowing briefly, Secretary Fabio asked somewhat suggestive while he tucked the parchment into a wooden cylinder after ascertaining, if all the ink on the paper had dried.

“What is?”

The usual, huh?

Even while the irritation was plainly visible on her face, Aura didn’t take offence at it and urged her secretary to speak up.

The middle-aged secretary frankly phrased his words without so much as reacting to the sharp glance of the Queen.

“I mean the actual decree. In my opinion, the ‘Salt Road’ justifies the deployment of the royal army more than enough and I deem it unnecessary to have allowed Marquis Guzzle to deploy his army.”

The statement from the secretary was exactly what Aura had expected.

At any given opportunity, the middle-aged secretary with the slender face would deliberate take up a stance contrary to hers. Sometimes he did so after the decision was made, like this time, and sometimes he brought about a quarrel before the decision was made.

Of course he wasn’t stating it because he thought that his opinion was correct from the bottom of his heart.

His aim was rather to stir her thinking and incite her to come up with other alternatives. What was more, the conversation with him before a decision let her simulate how someone could oppose her during the meeting for that decision.

He was a useful man. That was out of the question. He certainly was, but…

(He is irritating after all.)

Aura replied while she harboured this impression from which she no longer knew how often she had it up to this day.

“Otherwise General Puyol Guillén might be going out himself. If we carelessly let him accumulate achievements, his appointment as ‘Marshal’ would become more realistic. I cannot really appreciate that.”

“But when the royal army solves an incident in the outlands, it will add to their track record. If all goes well, would it not present a good opportunity to position our troops in the outlands from then on?”

Replacing the armies of the feudal landowners guarding the borders with the royal army. That had been a major agenda for Aura regarding the national defence for a while now.

In that sense, Secretary Fabio was right. It was no bad call to make the deployment of the royal army for incidents in the outland “self-evident” by sending out the troops for a chances like this.

However, Aura shook her head without hesitation.

“No. The problem is that once we start to reinforce the royal army and position a division at the border, we will have to see it through all at once. The more time it takes, the longer we will expose ourselves to other countries. The time is still not ripe for it yet.”

“You might end up missing your chance altogether, when you wait for a good opportunity too much. In the worst case, there might not appear a better opportunity than this during your reign. Do you stand fast regardless?”

“I do not mind. Being greedy will only lead to the worst. Managing a country is no gamble.”

Her reply was staggeringly resolute.

There was no doubt that Aura boldly wanted to replace the outland lords' armies with the royal army for the defence of the borders, so that threats from beyond could be dealt with more swiftly.

However, she also understood better than anyone how great of a risk such a reorganisation of the army carried.

If she were to send the royal army high-handed into the outlands before the armies of the feudal landowners were downsized, it could lead to a rebellion.

On the other hand, if the diminishment of outlands' armies were to come first, they would be vulnerable to other countries.

Pressing the matter would either enrage the lords of the outlands or tempt the ambitions of other countries. In that case, it was far better to maintain the current situation. To begin with, the Carpa Kingdom was a major power. As a major power they couldn't just sit on their hands, but neither was there any need to assume full risk.

Following, Aura said.

"Besides, the only troops we can deploy to the March of Guzzle right now are stationed right next to the capital. It would waste unnecessary time when we send them off from the capital. Since the salt stocks in the domain do not last forever, we simply have to deal with it through a faster method."

"If you argument like that, would it not be better to have the royal army ready to deploy for the unlikely event that Marquis' son fails?"

"Is that really necessary? I cannot imagine that General Puyol Guillén would stand on the sidelines in such a situation. I am sure that he would march the army at once if the army of the Marquis were to fail their mission."

"Even more reason then. General Guillén's achievement will only turn out all the better, if the royal army deploys on his demand. I think we have to keep up appearance that you initiated the deployment of the army, Your Highness."

For the first time today, Aura hesitated to give an immediate answer to the decisively phrased advice of Secretary Fabio.

She placed her hand against her chin and mused for a while.

"…You have a point there. Fine. Issue a 'long term manoeuvre in the countryside' before General Puyol can make his move. The general may pick all the personal by himself."

Then she instructed her secretary like that. Needless to say, the training ground was going to be the nearest one to the March of Guzzle.

"As you command. The provisions must be adequate for a possible 'roundtrip to the Salt Road' after the manoeuvre. Lastly, shall I inform Marquis Guzzle about the manoeuvre?"

The secretary explained the training schedule as if he had carefully prepared it beforehand, whereat Aura shook her head this time.

"No need. We have no reason to hide it, but neither a reason to tell him in particular. Just leave it be. I am sure it will reach his ears sooner or later. I would not want to him to feel needless pressure through a misunderstand if we were to tell him about it on purpose."

"Yes, very well."

As he seemed to have said everything he wanted to say now, the middle-aged secretary bowed in such a perfect manner that he appeared inhuman.

* * *

As the Queen, Aura's days were busy and hectic.

In the conference room, she attended important meetings about politics or military. In the audience room, she welcomed ambassadors of other countries to hear their appeal. And in the office, she looked through the accumulated dragonskin parchments.

There was so much work that she would have to cut back on her sleeping time and bring a LED floor lamp into her office, if she wanted to finish all of it to perfection. At least, Zenjirou would undoubtedly have done that in her position.

However, Aura wasn't that heavy-handed. She somewhat knew when to work hard and when to relax.

In the long run, it was much more agreeable to do the daily work imperfectly instead of having the Queen collapse from burdening herself to the limit.

Thus Aura suspended her duties for today's afternoon and enjoyed some recreation with her beloved husband in the inner palace.

At noontide the sun assailed with aggressive sunrays.

The sound of wood clashing against wood resounded in the courtyard of the inner palace.

"Come on, right!"

"Kuh!"

It originated from the wooden sticks in Aura and Zenjirou's hands. Both sticks were about one metre and fifty centimetre long.

Aura, wearing a light military uniform, swung around the stick, which mimicked a short spear, skilfully while Zenjirou, dressed in a T-Shirt and sweat pants, parried it clumsily.

"Next, left!"

"Guh!"

"Once again right!"

"Agh!"

Naturally, Aura was holding back quite a bit, but even so, Zenjirou perceived it as a series of attacks to which not even the slightest inattention was permitted.

With a desperate expression, he somehow parried the attack with the “basic defence stance”, which he had learned from Aura.

“Hey, your legs!”

“Aw!? Buh!”

His exposed legs were tripped by her stick and he fell hard.

The soft lawn they practiced on prevented any injuries, but the fall hurt nevertheless. However, Zenjirou hadn’t even the time to squirm with pain right now.

“Come on, you are sitting ducks when you do not move. Stand up again right away! Otherwise roll over at least!”

Saying so, Aura swung her stick down a few times next to his head.

“Damn!”

Zenjirou, still looking desperate, rolled to the side and quickly stood up with all his might. A spray of water was cast off his entire body as he rolled over, pretty much like when a dog shook after coming out of the water.

Both, Aura and Zenjirou, were dripping wet as if they had poured water over themselves. The reason wasn’t just the sweat from the exercise, but also because of the water fountain that was right next to lawn, where they practiced with their sticks. The white marble fountain kept spouting water higher into the air than his height without rest.

The two of them were exercising exactly downwind.

On purpose, of course.

The maximum temperature during this time of the day exceeded forty degree, so it was too hot for a normal person to move around dashingly for a long time, unless it was under special circumstances like this.

“Good. Once again your legs!”

“Kuuh!”

This time, Zenjirou managed to parry the sweep at his feet by thrusting his stick into the ground, but Aura’s attack wasn’t over yet.

“No good. Now your flank is exposed.”

She let her own stick glide upwards along Zenjirou’s stick stuck into the lawn, tucked it under his armpit and yanked it up with a jerk.

“Uwah!?”

Lifted up, Zenjirou fell flat onto the lawn once again.

Obviously there was a good reason to why they were wasting their quality time together by doing a slightly violent exercise amidst the heat like this.

Namely, to get rid of Zenjirou’s physical inactivity that he had been worried about for a while now. Another reason was that Aura wanted to say good-bye to the subcutaneous fat that she had built up during her pregnancy.

She had given birth to the first prince without problems, but even after the child had left her stomach, her figure or weight hadn’t changed back to what they had been before the pregnancy.

Well, that goes without saying.

In modern Japan, doctors and nutritionists would have made it possible that Aura was on a “diet that provided the necessary nourishment for her and the chid without making her fat”, but this world had no such thing as nutritional science, so going on a thoughtless diet would result in malnutrition and just endanger the child in her stomach.

A bit of excessive nutritional intake was still better than malnutrition. Doctor Michelle had prescribed that, so obeying him, Aura had taken meals “for two”. As a matter of course, she had gained weight.

Gaining weight after childbirth wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but the viewpoint of a mother aside, Aura couldn’t stand for the current situation as a woman.

Whether it was a blessing or not, the “glass mirror” Zenjirou had brought along was a ruthless reality check for Aura.

The “glass mirror” showed her silhouette unadulterated, contrary to the vague reflections in the small silver or water mirrors.

With one look at her sagging chin in the “glass mirror”, it became impossible to make excuses.

Fortunately, there were no signs of a “marital crisis”, where her husband distanced himself from her, for now, but she couldn’t presume on his sympathy, either.

There was a saying that “love withers along with the appearance”, which naturally didn’t apply to all married couples, but it certainly had a germ of truth.

“Okay, last one. Here I go, a downward swing!”

Aura raised her stick over her head in a slightly exaggerated manner on purpose, then swung it straight down at the crown of his head.

She was holding back so much that she could stop the attack at any time, if necessary, but even so, Zenjirou could barely react to it.

“Haah!”

BAM! The two wooden sticks clashed and made a shrill sound pretty much like metal.

Zenjirou’s stick, raised horizontally a hairbreadth above his head, had parried Aura’s downward attack.

“…..”

“…….Good. That shall be enough for today.”

“…Puah!”

His wife exchanged her serious expression with a smile and announce the end of the session, whereat Zenjirou flopped onto the lawn with a big sigh that released all of the air from his lungs.

“Fuh…”

“Hah, hah, hah…”

A bit out of breath, Aura sat down on the edge of the fountain and pleased by the spray of water from behind, she narrowed her eyes to slits. Meanwhile, Zenjirou was stretching all his limbs on the lawn and breathing roughly.

“Zenjirou, want some?”

As she had completely recovered before him, she took the PET bottle filled with drinking water out of the fountain and put it next to his head as he was putting his feet up.

“Uhh… Hah, hah… GULP, Mm, GULP…”

Zenjirou somehow sat up and gulped down the substance from the PET bottle in one go without sparing the time to thank Aura for it.

The drink was water mixed with brown sugar and the sap of a citrus fruit. The bottle had simply been plunged into the water fountain, so it wasn’t really cooled down, but he appreciated it how the lukewarm liquid was actually easier to swallow right now.

“Fuh… I’m back to life…!”

After emptying the 500ml PET bottle in one gulp, Zenjirou uttered emotionally.

His whole body started to ooze sweat due to the sudden intake of water. The bruises from being lightly hit by Aura coupled with his body being on fire from the exercise, made him want to jump straight into the water fountain.

“It seems you have settled down a bit. I think I was careful enough, but how is it? Do you feel any pain?”

Hearing Aura ask that, Zenjirou felt up his still powerless body.

During the training, his body was stabbed and hit by her stick again and again, but now that he checked, it didn’t really hurt anywhere.

The tip of their training sticks technically had been amply wrapped with a soft cloth, but the stick was essentially one and a half metre long and made out of hard wood, so it wouldn’t have been strange if he had fractured a bone or two, much less snapped a muscle or vein.

However, Aura must have held back properly. As far as he was aware, his injuries amounted to nothing but bruises.

“I’m all good, it seems. My left side and right thigh sting a bit, but that’s all. See.”

Saying so, Zenjirou stood up right where he was and moved both his arms wriggly up and down.

He was staggering like a newborn fawn, as his legs still hadn’t recovered yet, but no part of his body hurt when he strained it.

Just like Aura had done earlier, he now sat down on the edge of the fountain.

His exhausted body would fall backwards into the water fountain if he wasn’t careful, but it wouldn’t matter if that were to happen. The basin of the fountain wasn’t deep enough, so that anyone could drown in it.

Might as well let my heated body fall back into the water now.

Tempted to do so, he glanced behind him at the water fountain. At that moment.

“So, what do you say about your first spear practice? Let me hear your opinion.”

Aura approached him and asked that, then said down on the rim of the fountain right next to him. Zenjirou was only around two finger lengths taller than Aura when they were standing, but when they sat next to each other like this, the difference almost doubled.

The question was whether Zenjirou’s legs were short or Aura’s legs were long. The conclusion wouldn’t turn all too favourable no matter how long he were to ponder about it, so he deliberately shook off the issue, as the answer was quite obvious, and replied to Aura’s question.

“Well, I knew it would be hard and didn’t even once thought it would be a cakewalk, but it was even worse. I’m dead beat. Reminds me of how my soccer club in high school once had a practice match against a junior youth team.”

Answering like that, Zenjirou showed a wry smile and shook his head in an exaggerated manner.

The later part of his sentence had terms like high school, soccer club and junior youth team, where the “soul of words” didn’t work, but Aura apparently could understand what he wanted to say just from the former part.

“Hmm, martial arts is not so plain that an amateur could prevail over an expert after all, unless you are blessed with incredible talent. If you had started to train from a young age like I did, you might have been even stronger than me by now.”

Not overestimating her own strength, Aura replied with a smile.

As a matter of fact, she was as strong as an ordinary knight at best. Compared to a soldier like General Puyol, who had made a name for himself even across the borders, she was small fry.

As a man, Zenjirou wasn’t gifted with a particular good physique or athletic abilities, but he wasn’t an absolute weakling, either.

Even without flattery, it was extremely conceivable that he would be as strong as Aura by now, if he had practiced since childhood like she did.

Zenjirou understood that Aura was saying the truth, but at the same time, he perceived the hidden meaning that “it was too late to start now”, too, so he couldn’t help but intensify his wry smile.

“Ahaha, thanks. Well, I just want to keep in shape anyway and don’t plan to ever make use of the techniques.”

“A wise decision. Of course I will not stop you, if you seriously want to make an effort for it, but otherwise there is not really a reason to overexert yourself.”

Aura, too, agreed with the opinion of her husband and smiled back at him.

Considering that Zenjirou was one of the very few royalty in the Carpa Kingdom, it certainly was unthinkable that he would get into a situation, where he had to use his superficial martial art skills.

Even if he himself wanted to learn how to handle a spear or sword as a form of sport, he could never picture himself actually using his skills on a battlefield.

“Yeah, I don’t intend to take it that serious. To begin with, it’s unlikely I’ll be able to handle it single-handed with my strength…”

Zenjirou claimed that and raised the pseudo spear with his right hand while remaining seated on the rim of the fountain.

Right now, he was still at the basic of basics, so he had only learned to wield it with both hands, but in reality, one often was supposed to hold the short spear in one hand and a wooden shield in the other at war.

In addition to that, one was only considered a master with the spear, when you were also able to “throw it” in an emergency, so it was inevitable that it was merely considered an exercise to stay healthy while he could only swing it around with both hands.

“Indeed. You kind of lack the strength to wield a spear as a soldier.”

Upon her words, he somewhat exaggeratedly threw his hands up in horror.

“Uwah, now you’ve said it… But you’re right. Your blows were really heavy and it seemed like my stick would get sent flying.”

Heavy. Seeing as he nonchalantly mentioned the number one taboo word for a woman on a diet, the current exhaustion must have dulled his train of thought quite a bit. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t make a mistake like this.

“I, I see. That ‘heavy’, huh.”

Even Aura’s expression twitched.

“Yeah, super heavy. Each strike carried such a weight that I thought I would get blown away. I can hardly believe that you’re only on par with an ordinary knight. Well, my weakness plays a part, too.”

Saying so, he smiled innocently.

“Agh…”

Heavy, would get blown away, carry such a weight. These words were said without malice, but right now, each of them were like a dagger to Aura.

Not good. At this rate, they would have their first marital strife after getting married.

“O- Oh, by the way, on an unrelated subject, an issue came up at the morning meeting today. It does not really concern you personally, but I will fill you in on it anyway.
You have heard about the ‘Salt Road’ from Lady Octavia in your lessons, right? Now, …”

As she wished for a harmonious married life, Aura forcefully attempted a topic change with an obvious quicker manner of speaking than usual.

* * *

At night of the same day.

Alcohol had been distilled in the living room of the inner palace all morning through, so the smell of alcohol was still faintly hanging in the air at night.

In the afternoon, Zenjirou have had spear practice with Aura in the courtyard, so the windows in the living room had been left open to air the room, but the smell was still lingering persistently.

Maybe the distilled alcohol had even permeated the furniture and carpet?

(I better do it in the courtyard next time?)

While thinking about that, Zenjirou poured his self-distilled beverage from the former whiskey bottle into two glasses. They had the same design with respective detailed patterns in red and blue, and were a type of cut glass called “Satsuma Kiriko”. Amongst all his tableware, these were the most expensive ones.

His self-distilled beverage had a high alcohol level from being distilled over and over again and a slight amber colour, but was mainly colourless and transparent.

“Could you try this? To be honest, when I had the available waiting maids try this around noon, they didn’t rate it all too good.”

Saying so, he showed a bitter smile and held out the red glass to his wife sitting on the couch.

It was inexcusable to let the Prince Consort, aka himself, drink something without sampling or testing it for poison first, even if it was made by himself. And even less when it concerned the Queen, aka Aura.

Therefore he had the waiting maids, who were off duty, drink it in advance and confirmed that there was nothing wrong with them, allowing him to serve it now.

The essential evaluation had been… well, just like he had said earlier.

And unfortunately, Aura, too, shared that opinion.

“Hmm… How shall I put it? It is dry and flat.”

After one sip, Aura declared plainly and frowned a bit.

“Figures… Haah.”

Even while dropping his shoulders disappointed, Zenjirou had no choice but to acknowledge it, since he had been aware of it already.

The distillery with the electronic hotplate automatically regulated the temperature, too, so the distillation itself wasn’t all that difficult, but Zenjirou was practically an amateur at it. And of course, he didn’t even know any “tricks” to add a flavour or aroma to the distilled beverage.

Aura sampled the liquid once more and comforted the depressed maker in front of her.

“But it certainly is a surprisingly ‘strong’ alcohol, like you have claimed. That alone is already a good selling point. You just need to add fruit juice or spices for flavour when you drink it. Poor fruit wines or ales are drunk like that as well.”

Zenjirou clapped his hands upon hearing her words.

“Oh, I see. I just need to make something like Shouchuu. People often drink that mixed with soda or limeade, too, instead of straight as it is.”

Saying so, he drunk from his blue Kiriko glass, too. Back in Japan, he had only ever drunk low-malt beer or cheap whiskey, but even so, he recognized the value of this alcohol, which was irrevocably “nothing but high-proof without taste“, and cheered up a bit.

“Speaking of, they let whiskey and brandy ripe in wooden barrels for years after distillation, too. I guess it’s only natural that a mere distillate is tasteless?”

Scouring his vague memories, Zenjirou mumbled that. Aura, emptying her glass before him, put the empty glass onto the table and opened her mouth to reply to him.

“Oho, so there is still room for improvement? By the way, is it possible to replicate this so-called ‘distilling’ without the particular equipment you have brought along?”

Zenjirou tilted his head a bit musing and frowned while answering the curious question of his wife.

“Mhm, well, it isn’t impossible per se. The basic idea’s pretty simple. You basically just keep heating an alcohol drink at temperatures of seventy to hundred degree, collect the vaporized alcohol from it and liquefy it again. But controlling the heat is a problem… I think it would require a lot of trail and error to get the hang of it with a normal wood fire.”

“Is that so? Controlling the heat, huh? How hot would these seventy to hundred degree roughly be?”

Upon Aura's question, Zenjirou, sitting comfortably on the couch, shifted his gaze towards the ceiling and mused.

"Ehm… What would be a good indication? Oh, I know. You should be familiar with these: Water vaporizes at around hundred degree and our usual bath temperature should be forty degree more or less. So it's 'exactly the medium between these two'."

He believed that it had been a rather sketchy explanation, but Aura seemingly grasped the meaning of it.

She leaned a bit forward on the opposite couch and replied after a firm nod.

"I see. So in terms of sensibility, it is quite a high temperature. Or at least too hot to 'measure it with the hand'."

"Well, duh, you would burn yourself."

Zenjirou wrinkled the space between his eyebrows and shivered, as he imagined it.

In reality it might be possible to get in contact with seventy degree for an instant without getting burned, but it didn't change the fact that measuring the temperature with the "hand" was unfeasible.

"But there are other ways. Although their speciality is a bit different, the craftsmen, who extract sugar, might have a keen sense for measuring the water temperature."

Aura suggested that, where at Zenjirou approved, too.

"Guess so. Distilled beverage has existed in my world for ages, so I think it all depends on the senses and experience of the craftsman after he remembered the basic method."

The history of distilled beverages dated back to ancient times. Its production process was principally simple, too. Even without an electronic device to control the temperature, it should be more than feasible to replicate it with the skills and judgement of a craftsman.

In the past, blacksmiths had determined the optimum temperature to strike the iron from the "colour of the flame". The current Carpa Kingdom must have blacksmiths with such "keen eyes", too.

Compared to that, it shouldn't be all that difficult to measure the right temperature for distilling alcohol with the eye or skin, either.

Of course it was necessary to train professionals and provide the generals tools to make it happen. The problem was whether the hard liquor was profitable enough to invest so much into it or not.

Although the Carpa Kingdom was a major power, its treasury was still devoted to repair the war damages and definitely had nothing to spare.

Capable people, funds and time. All of these were limited. They couldn't readily jump at the chance, even if it might become profitable to the Kingdom in the future.

For now, Aura decided to treat the "distilled beverage" matter as nothing more than a hobby of her husband, and changed the topic to a more interesting subject.

"Okay. It should be worth to try out a few things sooner or later. As for another matter altogether, I have been told that the development of the 'glass' manufacture will begin in a few days.

There was not much budget, so the team consists not even of a dozen of people. But they are all either retired blacksmiths or experienced blacksmiths apprentices, so they are used to working with fire."

Aura reported proudly, whereas Zenjirou inquired, albeit knowing her answer already deep inside.

"Retired ones and apprentices, huh. I guess 'active' blacksmiths were out of the question?"

And true to his hunch, Aura showed a wry smile.

"Yeah, the blacksmiths are essential to our country after all. The retired blacksmiths are one thing, but it was quite the ordeal to rope just the apprentices in for it."

Saying so, she shrugged her shoulders a bit while sitting comfortable on the couch.

The active blacksmiths were irreplaceable professionals. In a way, they were even more important than a skilled knight or excellent civil official.

These valuable people couldn't be assigned to a new business, where it was unknown when it would show signs of success. No, technically it wasn't impossible to assign them with Aura's authority, but as a result, the national iron production would plummet, which in turn troubled Aura the most as the Queen.

Of course it was quite unlikely that the appointment of just one or two blacksmiths would result in such a conspicuous damage, but it would undoubtedly give all the blacksmiths an unfavourable impression of the royal family at least.

Veteran craftsmen not only tended to have high pride, they also banded together.

Therefore it was better to avoid getting on their bad side, if possible.

"Anyway, these are the only people I can assign to the 'development of glass' right now. Needless to say, it is a simple matter to add more people for things bearing no relation to the development or manufacture, like transporting materials or building necessary tools.

Also, an own waterwheel at the facility would be of advantage, too. In the DVD you showed me, it looked like they often used a stone mortar for grinding broken bricks into powder or sand into even finer sand.

The project is understaffed, so it would be better to outsource the work a waterwheel can do from the very beginning."

"Oh right, you actually have waterwheels."

When Aura mentioned it, Zenjirou recalled how Octavia had told him about it during a lesson.

Waterwheels had existed in his original world even before Christ. It wasn't really strange that the Carpa Kingdom was commonly using them, too.

Aura raised her eyebrows a bit upon his words, but answered with a nod.

"Yes, we have a lot of rivers throughout the country after all. In the farming areas, they are effectively used for mills. It is just that the craft originally comes from the Northern Continent. Compared to their waterwheels, ours are far more short-lived. For some reason, the cogged wheels soon start to make loud noises and break easily."

"Mh? Short-lived? Doesn't it just mean that the numbers of teeth on the meshing cogs aren't 'coprime'?"

It happened when Zenjirou reasoned like that while vaguely recalling the excursion from his math teacher in middle school.

"Huh? 'Coprime'? What does that mean?"

Aura's utterance was drown out by a knocking on the door and the familiar voice of a waiting maid asking "excuse me?" from beyond the door.

"Yes, come in."

Putting their conversation on hold, Zenjirou gave permission to enter the room with a loud voice and in the next moment, the door opened and three familiar waiting maids came into the living room, where the married couple had made themselves comfortable.

The blonde maid, standing in the middle as their representative, bowed to the two royalty sitting on the couch, then proffered their concern.

"Excuse us for disturbing you at night. It seems the temperature will not drop tonight, either, so I would like to acquire some ice for Prince Carlos. Do I have your permission?"

"Oh, right. It still is a bit dangerous. Okay, sure. Take it."

Zenjirou casually authorized it like that.

Even if he had a five-door refrigerator, the space for making ice in the freezer was limited. If the ice portion for tonight was taken away, Zenjirou and Aura had to settle for just the water tub and the ventilator in front of it to make it through this sultry night. But they could endure that if it was for their cute little child.

The people of the Carpa Kingdom basically were resistant against the heat by birth, but the nights during the hottest season were definitely tough on a one-month old baby. In fact, cases of infants dying due to the heat in the summer were relatively common, even amongst wealthy people like nobility.

The electric cable didn't reach the room, where Carlos was resting with the wet nurse, so they couldn't set up the ventilator there, but instead, the room, narrowed with partitions, was replete with cold air from the ice.

And every night, one of the waiting maids was apparently staying awake, too, to change his diaper or feed him with the baby bottle, easing the burden on the wet nurse, but that night watch was an "object of envy" amongst the waiting maids, so the room of the prince must be chilled quite a bit.

The waiting maids lowered their heads respectfully while saying "thank you very much", and headed for the refrigerator.

"Hmm, I wish we could have Carlos sleep in the same room as us…"

With her back to the waiting maids, who were opening the fridge, Aura mumbled with still lingering feelings.

Of course she wasn't regretting the absence of ice in the bedroom, but rather the fact that her beloved child Carlos couldn't sleep in the same room as her.

As the father, Zenjirou completely agreed with his wife at heart, but he pushed away that thought and explained with a wry smile.

"That won't happen. And you know why, too. A baby of his age frequently cries, soils his pants and gets hungry at night. If you were to get up for it every time, you wouldn't be able to do your job during the day."

Even if the waiting maids took care of feeding him and changing the diapers, Aura would still wake up every time when he cried if they were sleeping in the same room.

A repetition of such an interrupted sleep cycle would self-evidently affect her duties during the days.

Aura understood that in the head and never intended to push her own selfishness through.

"…Yes, I know. Being a Queen is not all roses, seeing as I cannot even take care of my own child."

The reason she couldn't help but complain about it regardless, surely was the deep affection for her child.

As he sympathised with the grumbling of his wife, Zenjirou also joined in with a slightly bitter expression.

"It's still all very well for you. I on the other hand will have to stop talking to Zenkichi altogether soon."

He vented a sigh of regret, as his emotions got the better of him while he spoke.

"Now that is something inevitable. After all, you do not speak in our local language, but in the one of your world. In his current blank slate, it would definitely not be a positive influence on Carlos."

Saying so, Aura smiled comforting at her husband sitting across of her.

A grumbler and a comforter. At some point, their positions had suddenly switched.

"Well, yeah…"

Zenjirou heaved a sigh once more.

In this world, where the "soul of words" automatically translated languages, it was common sense not to speak to an infant in a different language until it learned to speak for itself.

The only time, when the power of the "soul of words" couldn't be borrowed, was when a baby without any prior knowledge started to learn its first words.

As a consequence, there was a risk that the baby learned a jumble of words, when there where people around it, who used two different languages.

After all, a child couldn't intentionally repress the magic flow to deactivate the "soul of words" yet.

To serve as an example: Zenjirou teaches him the word "papa" with the meaning of "father". Father = Papa. Once he memorized it like that, Carlos would automatically hear the translated word "papa" from then on, even if Aura and others tried to teach him the word for "father" in their language.

As a result of continuing to learn words like that, Carlos would end up using a very odd language that was a mixture of Japanese and the local language of the western part on the South Continent.

In short, he would ordinarily speak in dubious terms like "let's bailar together".

To avoid that, it was necessary to keep away people, who spoke a different native language, from the baby as much as possible until it learned the regular words.

Zenjirou comprehended these circumstances, but it certainly was a harsh fate to be forbidden to interact with his adorable son.

“Moreover, Zenkichi is a boy. Once he turns five years old, he isn’t allowed to come into the inner palace anymore.”

He sighed yet again.

It was a custom in the Carpa Kingdom to treat children under five years as genderless, so Prince Carlos could be raised in the inner palace for now, but even the crown prince was no exception to the ban of males in the inner palace.

Once he welcomed his fifth birthday, the royal palace would become his new home instead of the inner palace and he would gradually been educated as a royalty together with his foster siblings by teachers for literacy and martial arts.

Unless Zenjirou stopped shutting himself away in the inner palace, he would definitely grow apart from his own son in the future.

“…I guess I should have them prepare a room for me in the royal palace, too, in the future.”

While Zenjirou mumbled away like that, the waiting maids skilfully put the huge basin with ice onto the hand cart, then pushed it over the carpet in the direction of the door.

The hand cart, too, was brought over from modern Japan by Zenjirou. He had especially bought it at the hardware store to transport the hydropower generator, but ever since he came here, it was more often used by the maids to lessen their labour than by himself.

“Excuse us then.”

“Well done.”

“Thanks.”

The waiting maids retreated after a bow, whereat Aura and Zenjirou, still sitting on the couches, called out to them like that in appreciation of their troubles.

The door closed with a quiet CLATTER sound, then the living room at night was once again exclusive to the royal couple.

“…..”

“…..”

The six LED floor lamps illuminated the couches while they still sat opposite of each other and passed time without saying anything.

The fact that neither of them tried to push a conversation during this silence showed how “natural” it had become for the two of them to be all alone together.

The comfortable “tranquillity” then was disturbed when Aura spoke as she stood up from the couch.

“Well then, it is about time I go to bed as well. I will have to send the messenger of Marquis Guzzle to the March with my ‘Teleportation’ first thing in the morning. If I were to perform a large magic with lack of sleep, it would hinder me from doing my duties later on.”

Saying so, she looked at the clock on the TV stand.

The digital table clock was obviously displaying the time with Arabian numerals, but Aura had mastered the reading of the Arabian numerals as well as the division of time, twenty-four hours with sixty minutes each with sixty seconds each, during the last year.

Recently, the civil officials in the royal palace were being taught the Arabian numerals, too, but no one was nearly as good as Aura yet.

In fact, the young waiting maids known as the “Three Troublemakers” might be more accustomed to them than the officials, since they habitually borrowed the “portable game console” from Zenjirou and competed for the high score in the “drop-down game” or “cart racing game” behind their superior’s back.

Anyway, Aura slowly raised her body from the couch after she had declared to retire early tonight, and asked her husband.

“What about you?”

Zenjirou mused over the question of his wife for a bit, then shook his head slowly and replied.

“Hmm, I’ll stay up a bit longer. I still have to do my ‘magic practice routine’ before bedtime, so you can go to sleep before me.”

Previously, Zenjirou had immediately chased after her when she left for the bedroom, but the circumstances were a bit different now. Although they had recently started to sleep in the same bed again, at the present time, they would only sleep arm in arm at best. Any direct sexual intercourse was out of the question.

Admittedly, Aura was the heroine that survived the previous war, but it was a bit relentless to expect her to repeat a pregnancy and delivery in the very next year after giving birth to the first prince. It definitely would be a drawback for the government affairs this time.

Due to that, everything related to making a child was “temporarily on hold” right now.

By the way, Zenjirou had cursed himself to death for not bringing any condoms from his world when the decision for abstinence had been made in consultation with Aura.

And it certainly must have been a rather serious matter for him, since he had kind of asked her in earnest if it was possible to apply the “space-time magic, so that it summoned things from Earth without the correct star constellation”.

“Fine. Then I will go ahead.”

“Mhm. I’ll follow you soon enough.”

After Zenjirou had stood up as well, Aura naturally twined her arms around his neck and then their lips overlapped.

“Mm…”

“Mm.”

An embrace and a kiss. The embrace wasn’t as intimate as before anymore. Was that an indication that Aura had lost confidence in her dieting body?

“Good night.”

“Yeah, night.”

After they released each other from their embrace at the same time, Aura disappeared into the bedroom.

“…Okay, time to get the magic practice over with and hop into bed.”

Zenjirou shook his head a couple of times in order to shake off the sensation from the embrace with his beloved wife, and instructed himself like that with a slightly stressed tone, then he headed over to the desk with the computer to carry out his magic practice routine.

Chapter 02: Activity in the Capital

On a certain day, Aura welcomed the nobility from other countries and had an informal meeting at lunch in the courtyard of the royal palace.

It was common practice to take a long midday break during the hottest period of the year, but of course there were obvious exceptions.

Due to her schedule, Aura reluctantly had to sacrifice even her originally private lunch time for diplomacy, since she wouldn't otherwise find the time to do it for while if not for today.

At any rate, it was way too hot to have lunch in the dining hall like always during this season.

In light of this, the luncheon meeting was held next to the water fountain spraying its water high up.

Aura had chosen a structure with only a roof on four pillars for their meeting. It had no walls, so they wind could freely blow through it.

The roof warded off the aggressive sunlight and the lack of walls allowed the wind to carry a somewhat cool breeze over from the nearby fountain.

In this courtyard with the best countermeasures against the brutal heat as possible, Aura cut up the flat hardtack, immersed it into the spicy soup and brought it to her mouth, then looked at the middle-aged noble sitting to her right.

"I hope I have your understanding now, Count Zamurd. The reason we have deployed soldiers this time is to subjugate the meat dragons, which we assume have appeared on the state road. Nothing more than a domestic matter.
I would like you to convey it to the Navarra Kingdom similarly."

The Navarra Kingdom was a mid-size country south of the Carpa Kingdom. It bordered on the March of Guzzle of the Carpa Kingdom and in sheer numbers, their military strength was far inferior to the Carpa Kingdom, but they were formidable enough to somehow or other preserve their independence until the very end in the previous war.

Aura wanted to avoid to put their nose out of joint.

"Yes, I certainly have understood, Your Highness Aura. I promise you that I will convey it to my country without fail."

After listening to Aura, the middle-aged man— the noble from the Navarra Kingdom, Count Nalbia Zamurd said that and lowered his head a bit.

Count Zamurd didn't really have any traits to speak of. He was an ordinary man in his middle age: An average physique and an average height. His skin was brown, just the same as most people in the western part on the South Continent, and his hair and eyes were black.

It was basically said that the skin-, hair- and eye colour became darker the farther south you went on the South Continent, but there was seemingly no difference in racial appearance between the northerly Carpa Kingdom and the southerly Navarra Kingdom.

That said, everyone was wearing the simplified dress of their respective countries, so it wasn't all too difficult to conjecture the nationality in appearance.

The simplified dress from Count Zamurd was arranged around the symbolic colour of the Navarra Kingdom: yellow. Finishing his lunch, he put down the silver spoon next to the soup and looked Aura in the eye, continuing with his speech.

"Still, with all due respect, my country cannot ignore the matter when the incident on the Salt Road really is caused by 'Meat Dragons', as it happens right at the border.
Your Highness, I would like to caution my country to keep an eye on the 'northern border', too, when I write them about your purpose. Do I have your blessing?"

Queen Aura assented the request from the noble of the bordering country while keeping the vigorous smile on her face.

“Naturally. You may do that. Borders mean nothing to the dragons after all. Due to circumstances on our side as well, we cannot cooperate, but I have no reason to hinder you.”

“Yes, I appreciate your concern.”

Hearing her approval, Count Zamurd deeply lowered his head in a still sitting position.

Their conversation kind of feigned ignorance.

It definitely was a fact that the March of Guzzle bordered on the Navarra Kingdom, but a steep mountain range spanned between them as a kind of buffer, so there was no fear of the meat dragons, which had appeared in the March of Guzzle, crossing the border into the Navarra Kingdom unless something grave drove them into doing so.

Both, Count Zamurd and Aura, knew this of course.

The count deliberately sought the “permission to caution his homeland about the border” not for the meat dragons, but in regards to the army of the Carpa Kingdom. To put it simply, his reply amounted to: “If by chance, the information turns out to be a lie and the Carpa Kingdom is going to invade us, we will be ready, too.”

From the point of view of the Navarra Kingdom, that was the most natural reaction. It would be a failure as a country if they didn’t take precautions when a neighbouring country moved troops along the border.

Aura had anticipated his reply from the very beginning and had deliberately given Count Zamurd her approval, well aware of his implied intention. That was the unspoken side of their conversation.

If the Navarra Kingdom was only going to take precautions beyond the border, it was still within an agreeable range for Aura.

Carrying the spicy soup to her mouth with the silver spoon, Aura was sweating a bit on the forehead and she pondered innerly.

(Well, considering the difference in our military powers, I would say that they are not going to try anything stupid anyway, even without my consideration, but that does not mean I can just neglect to do so.)

The Carpa Kingdom was a prominent major power in the western part of the South Continent, whereas the Navarra Kingdom was nothing more than one of many mid-size countries.

Even if she were to act somewhat inconsiderate, it was rather unlikely that the other side would oppose stubbornly, but international diplomacy had “unexpected pitfalls” everywhere.

If she could avoid any unfortunate accidents through a simple post hoc conversation with the diplomat from the other country like this, it was an easy deal.

That, too, was possible because the Carpa Kingdom was a major power. If the power levels of their countries had been reversed, it would have become a lot more troublesome.

Seeking their “understanding after the fact” like this time would definitely be inexcusable then.

It would take priority that she first asked for the opinion of the other nation, explaining that she “will deploy the army near the border without any hostile intentions”, and get their “approval” in form of an “understanding”.

(Considering that, I cannot really complain about troubles of this level.)

Aura had to sacrifice her lunch break, which she originally would have spent together with her amiable husband in the presence of the ventilator, for an informal diplomacy meeting, so she persuaded herself like that.

Quenching her thirst with the lukewarm water from the silver goblet, Aura deliberately showed a pleased expression, then nodded somewhat exaggerated and shifted her gaze towards another person.

She eyed a man, who wore a simplified dress of another country with white stripes on purple cloth.

It was the diplomat from the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow: Knight Moreno Militec.

At the receiving end of her look, Knight Moreno cleared his throat once with an affected cough, then slowly began to speak in order to play his own role.

“First off, I am glad to see that it didn’t cause an misunderstanding between your two nations. I have great respect for Her Highness Aura’s consideration as well as Count Zamurd’s insight.
I hope my country can follow your example and establish a constructive and worthwhile relationship with nearby countries as well.”

“You honour us, Sir Moreno.”

In reaction to Knight Moreno’s words, Count Zamurd showed a little bit of relief on his almost perfect poker face and responded like that.

Needless to say, it was a consideration towards the Navarra Kingdom to let a third party, namely Moreno Militec, attend the informal meeting.

Considering the difference in power between the Carpa Kingdom and the Navarra Kingdom, it wouldn’t be all too strange when any verbal agreements here were annulled by force later on.

Of course, Aura had not the slightest intention to do something that dishonest, but the other party had no way to read her sentiment.

Aura had earned herself a reputation as a relatively sincere ruler of a major power, but she would have no choice but to dodge the question when asked if she had nothing to feel guilty about in the past.

Because it would be a lie if she were to say that she never went back on her word as the Queen for the sake of her country.

Therefore, she had Moreno Militec from the Twin Kingdom witness the meeting in order to lend credence to her words.

The Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow was a major power ruling supreme over the central area of the South Continent with a strength on par or even greater than the Carpa Kingdom. Even the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom couldn’t easily break her promise when someone from the Twin Kingdom had witnessed it.

And this intention of hers didn’t go unnoticed.

“My most profound thanks for your consideration, Your Highness.”

After giving Moreno a short glance, Count Zamurd looked at Aura on the seat of honour again and bowed deeply.

Explaining the “troop movements in the March of Guzzle” to the person from the Navarra Kingdom and coming to an understanding in the presence of someone from the Twin Kingdom.

That had been the objective of the informal meeting under the guise of a luncheon and it had been perfectly achieved in Aura’s eyes at this point of time.

However, she couldn’t just conclude the meeting now. Although it was just a pretext that nobody took at face value, the official designation was still a “private luncheon hosted by Aura”.

As they had already finished their lunch, the nobles drunk fruity water or soft alcohol drinks while making conversation.

In this world, the most common countermeasure against the heat was to sweat from a spicy soup, replenish the body fluids and then sweat again.

Due to that, one had to drink an adequate amount of water in summertime or one would suffer dehydration.

Even without a particular medical science, the people of this world were aware of the danger of dehydration through experience.

Amidst that, the diplomat from the Twin Kingdom, Moreno called out to the smiling Aura with a casual tone as in simple gossip.

“Still, I’ve got to say that the communication within your country is as quick as always, Your Highness. It’s very untypical for a major power. I take it that you have used your magic on this occasion?”

“Mh? Ah, yes. It was a pressing matter after all, so I send off the messenger with my magic.”

There was really no need to conceal it, so Aura answered honestly. Nevertheless, she was wary of him inwardly. Even without confirming it, it ought to be easily conceivable that she had used her “Teleport” magic for this matter. The only reason the diplomat from the Twin Kingdom deliberately inquired about it here was that he wanted to expand that topic now.

Whether he was aware of Aura’s suspicion or not, Knight Moreno widened his eyes in an exaggerated admiration and spoke.

“Oho! So it was your magic after all. I knew it, the practical use of the magic from the Carpa Royal Lineage really surpasses even the other royal lineages.
However, I would imagine it is all the more inconvenient at the present time. I mean, the magic is quite useful, but you are the only practitioner, Your Highness.”

“…Well, I guess so.”

I see, that is how he is going to play. Aura more or less figured out what Moreno would say next, so she relaxed a bit and affirmed it.

And as a matter of fact, the following words from Moreno were exactly what Aura had expected.

“Well then, what do you say about this, Your Highness? We could make your magic into a ‘magic tool’ in order to use it more efficiently.”

Keeping a sociable smile on his face, Knight Monero suggested this.

The manufacture of a “magic tool”. Of course he was referring to a “Teleport” magic tool.

(I knew it.)

Aura had to use all of her willpower to stop her smile from turning sour.

The suggestion to make “Teleport” magic tools was something the Twin Kingdom had enquired of the Carpa Kingdom since forever, not just in Aura’s generation.

And it was also an unresolved issue as the Carpa Kingdom had always pushed it aside. The “Teleport” magic was one of the advantages that had raised the Carpa Kingdom to be a prominent major power in the western part of the South Continent.

Embedding that magic into magic tools meant to bequeath the possibility that people apart from the Carpa Royal Family could use the “Teleport” magic, albeit restrictive.

In reality, the Twin Kingdom had once proposed to “make two teleport magic tools and distribute one to each side”.

There was no way Aura could accept a dangerous proposition, where she practically threw away an advantage of her country herself.

“That is a grateful offer, but I have to refuse. It is necessary to cooperate with the spell caster and tool manufacturer for years to make a magic tool, correct? As you mentioned before, I am currently the only practitioner of the ‘Space-Time Magic’. You surely do not expect me to vacate my throne and go to the capital of the Twin Kindom, do you?”

She knew what Moreno was getting at.

The Twin Kingdom wasn’t considering what Aura had just said, namely inviting her to the capital, either. They most likely had their eyes on Zenjirou.

Lately, Zenjirou was quickly making progress with his magic training. He still hadn’t a perfect control over his magical power, but he reached a point, where he succeeded in activating the magic at three out of five attempts.

Once he mastered his output of magical power, it would only be a matter of time until he learned the “Teleport” magic.

It was foreseeable that he would reach a practical level of the “Space-Time Magic” within this year at the earliest or next year at the latest.

Aura conjectured that the ultimate aim of the Twin Kingdom was to invite Zenjirou to their capital once he was able to use teleport.

(In that case, I cannot really give him a curt reply here.)

She frowned inwardly.

After all, Zenjirou himself had expressed his “intention to go to the capital of the Twin Kingdom as soon as he learned how to use ‘Teleport’”.

Making arrangements, so that he could bring over a practitioner of the “Healing Magic” from the Jilbell Lineage during Aura’s next delivery if necessary.

That was Zenjirou’s greatest goal of now.

Her husband was so devoted to his wife that Aura unconsciously cracked a smile just from remembering that.

Taking into account these prospective state of things, it was better when Aura avoided turning down the offer conclusively now.

She quickly settled her thoughts like that, but on a very rare occasion, her train of thought turned out to be completely futile.

The reason behind it was that Aura’s forecast was fundamentally different from Knight Moreno’s answer.

“Not at all, Your Highness. You may rest assured that is not the case. To tell you the truth, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona have shown a great interest in the ’transparent jewel’ and the ’diamond rings’ after laying eyes on them.
As long as you permit it, Your Highness Aura, the two of them have expressed their dear desire to visit the Carpa Kingdom once.”

“!?”

Faced with a completely unexpected statement, Aura failed to keep a straight face and revealed an expression of surprise.

However, that was only natural.

Prince Francesco and Princess Bona. Both of them were royalty from the “Sharrow Lineage”. It was one thing when a person from the “Jilbell Lineage” was summoned as a practitioner of the “Healing Magic”, but a member of the “Sharrow Royal Family”, also known as practitioners of the “Bestowal Magic”, had never set foot into a foreign country, at least not in the last hundred years.

Aura’s surprised reaction was actually rather moderate. Some of the present nobles from the Carpa Kingdom ended up snorting the drinks from their mouths over their clothes or tablecloth.

She couldn’t even blame them for this.

A visit from the “Sharrow Royal Family” was such a shocking revelation. Moreover, he was hinting at the manufacture of a “magic tool”, so it also presupposed a long stay depending on the circumstances.

“Ah, this is not set in stone, of course. I would appreciate it when you only treat it as some small talk at an informal gathering. But I swear that what I have said is the truth all the same.”

Moreno showed an affected grin on his face as if he was proud about the huge impact his utterance had caused at the end.

* * *

Night of the same day.

As always, Zenjirou and Aura were having some quality time for themselves on the couch in the living room after a dinner and a bath.

However, there were not sitting “next to each other”, but “opposite one another”.

They would sit next to each other when they talked leisurely. And when there was something to be discussed somewhat seriously, they would sit opposite one another. This unwritten rule had established itself at some point in the past year.

Due to that, Zenjirou had recognized how the conversation would turn out from the moment Aura had sat down in front of him, so he put down his whiskey on the rocks on the coaster on top of the table without having nipped at it yet.

His judgment didn’t seem to be incorrect as Aura began to talk with a serious expression that didn’t correspond with the comfortable clothes in form of a sheer nightgown that she had put on after the bath.

“Zenjirou, can we talk for a bit? I know it is not the most appropriate time for such a topic, but I want you to hear about it. It came up during the ‘luncheon meeting’ today…”

The six LED floor lamps illuminated the couch, where Zenjirou leaned forward a bit in his blue-striped pyjama and lent his wife an ear.

“Ehm, I don’t really get it. Is it really such a rare thing that the ‘Sharrow Family’ comes to another country?”

After listening to Aura’s explanation from beginning to last, Zenjirou first posed such a straight question.

The Prince and Princess of the “Sharrow Royal Family” might come to this country.

He understood that it was an important event, but even so, Aura’s surprise about it seemed a bit exaggerated to him.

For instance, Princess Isabelle had paid him an official visit last year and she was from the Jilbell Royal Family, the other royal linage in the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell.

Due to the short notice, only nobles from the Carpa Kingdom or ambassadors from other countries had attended the marriage of Aura and Zenjirou, but his private tutor Octavia had told him that marriage ceremonies of a ruler were usually witnessed by a great number of direct royalty from other countries.

Aura smiled a bit at his question, then nodded and answered.

"Yes, a visit from 'royalty' is not something extraordinary. A visit from THE 'Sharrow Royalty' on the other hand is extraordinary, because the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbill has two royal families. Foreign visits are principally entrusted to the 'Jilbell Family'.

The Kingdom did not last with a double leadership centuries-long for appearance's sake. They have properly allocated the duties.

I have heard, though, that there are many blurred authority structures between the two families and that they apparently fight over them in the shadows in the interest of their respective family."

Upon Aura's explanation, Zenjirou nodded with "I see".

"I guess when such a secluded royal family goes out of their way to visit another country, they have some kind of concrete goal?"

It went without saying, but he asked it nevertheless, whereat Aura consented like expected.

"Yes. Most likely, they are after your 'marbles'. Truth be told, the Twin Kingdom has intimated through letters from Princess Isabelle that they wish to buy up all the remaining 'marbles'.

I think it is safe to assume that the 'marbles' play an important part for the application of the 'Bestowal Magic' after all."

"Hmm, the marbles, huh…"

The glass balls were simple toys worth a few hundred yen per bag, but in this world, they were precarious objects that could disrupt the political balance between the royal families. Still, all of that didn't feel all too real to Zenjirou.

"Well, I'll leave the negotiations to you. Do as you like and tell me the outcome afterwards. Ah, by the way, what are the odds that they aren't after 'my bloodline'? At the beginning, they were rather persistent about it."

As he suddenly thought of it, he raised such a question, whereupon Aura put her right hand against her chin and mused for a while. Then she shook her head and answered.

"…No, I cannot deny the possibility of it, but I would say it is quite unlikely. Sure, Princess Bona is a young and unmarried royalty and when she pays us a visit, they probably think it will not do any harm to try to seduce you on the occasion, but even so, she cannot just go on the offensive in our palace.
If we have to be wary about something, then it is 'their palace'. At some point in time, you intend to go to the Twin Kingdom when you have mastered the 'Teleport' magic, right? Even if you should have magical power to spare, you certainly would not return on the same day. Their palace would undoubtedly give you a very 'warm welcome'.
And as long as the Sharrow Family has not given up on your bloodline, or rather on your person, they will make their move there."

Saying so, his wife showed a slightly menacing smile, which involuntarily made a shiver ran down his spine.

"Oh, okay. Yeah, I can see something like that happening."

Thinking about it, it was only natural.

Technically, he could jump directly to the permanent residence of the ambassador of the Carpa Kingdom in the capital of the Twin Kingdom with the "Teleport" magic, but there was no way that he would be allowed to make a short trip to their royal palace without notice.

Just like Aura had said, he would hardly be in a position to refuse the "warm welcome" with a hidden agenda.

(Not good. I might've taken this a bit too lightly.)

Although the matter was still far off in the future, Zenjirou became aware of his naive outlook and hung his head a bit in self-criticism on the couch.

Nevertheless, he couldn't let the initial goal of learning the "Teleport" magic and moving to the Twin Kingdom, falter just because of that.

It was more or less an established fact that Aura would give birth to a second or third child in the future.

During the birth of the first child, namely Carlos Zenkichi, he couldn't do anything and had to entrust everything to luck and Aura's stamina. He definitely didn't want to face the same incompetence for the next delivery again.

Once Zenjirou could travel back and forth to the Twin Kingdom with "Teleport", he would be able to immediately bring over a practitioner of the "Healing Magic" from the "Sharrow Lineage" when it came to the crunch.

He was willing to take a few risks for that.

Renewing his resolve about his future activities, Zenjirou corrected his posture on the couch and looked Aura, sitting across from him, in the eye.

"Okay. When that time comes, I'll be extra careful and do my best not to be ensnared."

"I see."

With a gentle look, the Queen gave a short answer to the reply of her husband.

His reply came about through the reasoning of not changing the presumed plan of "going to the Twin Kingdom as soon as he learned the 'Teleport' magic" in the least.

Aura realized that the root of his reasoning was his affection and consideration towards her, so she unwittingly cracked a smile, albeit worrying about his future.

"Fine. It is still something for the future, but I am counting on you once the time comes."

With her smile on display, she told that to her husband with a calm tone.

"Anyway, to get back on topic, when will that Prince and Princess of the Sharrow family come here?"

Amidst a bit more relaxed atmosphere, Zenjirou stirred his whiskey, diluted from the melted ice, with a silver spoon and drunk from the blue Satsuma Kiriko glass.

Aura wet her throat with the brandy from the red Satsuma Kiriko of the same design and leaned against the backrest of the couch, answering after inclining her head to the side.

"When, indeed. It is merely an 'unofficial chitchat' yet. I do not think that it will happen any time soon, but something like this never happened before. To be honest, I cannot guess their actions."

"Hmm, I see. Then it's no use being on guard already, I guess. Ah, speaking of, what kind of people are they? Do you know them?"

Aura shook her head to his question.

"No. Like I just told you, the Sharrow Royal Family rarely appears abroad. Compared to other royal families, there is barely any information about them.

All I know is their lineage and age. And maybe some exaggerated rumours that will be of no use."

She said that, then put her red glass back on the coaster on top of the table even though it was not empty yet.

As her husband asked the short question of "what kind of rumours?", Aura leaned backwards on the couch and continued to talk with her hands folded on her stomach.

"Mhm, let me tell you about their ages first. Prince Francesco is twenty-four years old whereas Princess Bona is sixteen. The prince is a direct descendant from the royal family and the grandson of the current king. Furthermore, he is the oldest son of the crown prince, who is pretty much assumed to become the next king."

Zenjirou widened his eyes in surprise upon the unexpected great family tree.

"That means he'll be the king after his father?"

That would be the case from interpreting Aura's explanation straightforward. In this world, it was no absolute rule that the eldest son would succeed the throne, but it was a favoured trend.

However, Aura shook his head to his question again.

"No, not quite. At least at the present time, Prince Francesco has no claim on the throne yet."

This statement surprised Zenjirou even more than before.

"EH!? But isn't he already twenty-four? Is that even possible?"

"No. Normally it would be impossible. There exists a precedent of a person with legitimate birth not being acknowledge as royalty, because he could not activate the 'bloodline magic', but Prince Francesco is known as one of the top five practitioners of the 'Bestowal Magic' amongst the current Sharrow Royal Family."

Zenjirou couldn't help but getting suspicious after hearing Aura's distinct words.

The legitimate grandson of the current king was already in his twenty-fourth year of age and had no problems to activate the "bloodline magic", yet for some reason, he had no "claim on the throne".

When he wasn't given the claim on the throne, even though there was nothing wrong with his lineage, age and talent, then the simplest solution would be that there was a problem with his "character".

"…Somehow, I don't really want to meet him anymore after hearing that."

"Same here."

Zenjirou muttered his impression with a frown, whereat Aura expressed her consent with a short nod.

"Nonetheless, they are breaking the longstanding silence by deliberately sending a delegation to our country, so he must have enough common sense not to cause an international problem… or at least I hope so."

Aura frowned a bit while saying so, then pulled herself together and started to describe the other royalty.

"The other visitor will be Princess Bona. She has pretty much the opposite background from Prince Francesco. Her parents are not royalty. She was born into a senior noble family with blood relation to the royal family and inherited the 'bloodline magic'. I think she is the 25th or 26th in the line of succession? Well, a rather low-ranked nobility."

"Oho, so even if you aren't of royal birth, you can get acknowledged as royalty as long as you can use the 'bloodline magic'."

Zenjirou said somewhat in awe, whereupon Aura nodded curt and responded.

"Yes. It varies from country to country, but the laws in the Twin Kingdom treat it like that. Well, the not pure-blooded royalty can practically use the bloodline magic, if only by a narrow margin, so it does not cause difficulties regarding the succession for the time being. In reality though, they have no other value than being a practitioner of the 'bloodline magic'.

She ought to have a rather weak standing inside the country."

"I see. It might be rude to say this, but she's a true 'princess in name only', huh."

"That sums it up. That is why it is so troublesome. Their intention is as plain as day."

Saying so, Aura gave Zenjirou a meaningful look. He discerned what she wanted to say and slurred his speech.

"Ahh… I see, indeed. In other words, I guess, they maybe, kind of, still haven't given up on me, after all?"

"Well, I am repeating myself, but I think she will not go on a foolish offence in our palace. More likely, they are thinking on the lines of making an early visit to deepen the acquaintance to you, with a 'nothing to lose' mindset."

Aura said and shrugged her shoulders a bit.

"Uwah… Sounds like it'll be quite tiresome…"

Zenjirou emptied his glass in one gulp so as to swallow the emerging sigh along with it.

Chapter 03: The Salt Road

The March of Guzzle in the Carpa Kingdom.

It was the most southern domain in the Carpa Kingdom. Amongst the countries in the western part of the South Continent, the Carpa Kingdom had the largest territory, but despite of that, there was hardly any difference in temperatures in the respective regions.

That said, it applied to the whole western part of the southern continent, not just the Carpa Kingdom alone. In other words, just as the capital was currently welcoming the season with the strongest sunrays within the year, so the March of Guzzle was undergoing the murderous heat as well.

This season was life-threatening to children or elder people when they stood in the sun for an hour without protection, and unsuitable for large-scale battles, only topped by the rain season.

These circumstances made it extremely unlikely that a war “amongst humans” would break out during this season according to a mutual understanding between the rulers of the South Continent.

However, there was a hostile existent on the continent that paid no attention to the conveniences of humans.

A species that adopted the best to the hot and humid South Continent. The predominant animal on the continent, which surpassed humanity by far in the term of simple habitat.

The carnivore dragons.

The Guzzle army marched out during the second most unsuitable season for battles, in order to restore the business on the “Salt Road” that was assumed to be disrupted by these carnivore dragons.

With a troop strength of around a hundred soldiers, they slowly advanced north on the “Salt Road”.

In the morning it was still relatively cool, but the descending sunlight already had an aggressive tint and vividly lightened up the green of the trees standing left and right to the road.

Although the “Salt Road” was a peerless state road in the Carpa Kingdom, it was built quite plainly in the eyes of a person from the modern age.

The middle of the road was levelled a bit elevated and shallow ditches were trenched on both side of it, so there was little chance that it became flooded even during the rainy season, but even so, next to no one from the modern age would agree to call this gravel-less path an “important traffic route of the Kingdom”.

It didn’t even compare to the gobbled state roads of the Roman Empire that have existed before the Common Era, much less the concrete highways of modern Japan.

Never mind that the technology was low in this world, they had magic that could manipulate the soil, so they should have better preconditions than the ancient Rome, yet the current state of affairs might be an evidence that the forces of nature were so much stronger here than on Earth.

Not to say that the flourishing road works of the Roman Empire might just have been an exceptional case in the history of Earth, considering the road conditions in Europe or Middle East after old Rome.

Anyway, the army of the March slowly proceeded along the “Salt Road”.

The vanguard was composed of knights mounting big and green “Raptorial Dragons”.

There were five in total of them. Each knight always had one squire accompany him.

The other soldiers, all carrying short spears, were following behind them on foot.

The whole infantry wore a thick cloak with a hood over their leather armour against the sunlight, but the vicious sun blazed down on them regardless and pressed out the water from their body.

More than half of the troops had already emptied their drinking bottles hanging from their waists.

The only exception was the supply corps at the back. They travelled on freight wagons pulled by ‘Hulking Dragons’.

Compared to “Raptorial Dragons”, the “Hulking Dragons” moved at a snail pace, but they were much stronger in compensation for it. They easily pulled the freight wagons, which were loaded with spare weapons, rations, water, firewood and cauldrons for cooking, and left big and deep tracks in the ground.

There were a couple of these wagons pulled by “Hulking Dragons”. A haul of this size was certainly necessary, considering the dietary needs of the hundred-strong army until the end of the operation.

If anything, the capacity of transporting from the “Hulking Dragons” was abnormal when faced with the common practice during the Middle Ages on Earth, as they could carry the estimated supplies for a hundred soldiers during a long-term operation on just a few wagons.

Five knights. Five squires. Ten Suppliers. Fifteen escorts for the supply corps. And lastly, a little bit more than seventy foot soldiers.

Compared to a typical formation, the number of knights was somewhat small, but the operation this time assumed that “the carnivore dragons had to be suppressed inside the forest” after all.

The knights were a branch of the army, who unfolded their high offensive power and mobility on open terrain, but on the other hand, they were underachieving in an area, where movement was restricted like on this occasion.

In reality, the five knights would dismount from their raptorial dragons and entrust the reins to their squires when it was time to fight.

“…Fuh.”

One of these five, a young knight with a small build and black hair and eyes, was repeatedly taking short, deep breaths for a while now, careful that no one nearby would notice it.

Xavier Guzzle.

That was the name of this fledging knight.

He was the third and only living son of Marquis Guzzle.

On a closer look, Xavier’s facial features closely resembled the Marquis’.

However, his physique was completely different. Unlike Marquis Guzzle, who wasn’t all that tall himself, but sustained his efforts to keep his body muscular even at an advanced age, Xavier’s body looked frail and extremely unreliable on a glance.

Right now, he was riding a raptorial dragon, so his height was hard to tell, but it seemed like he was even shorter than Zenjirou. Zenjirou was a hundred and seventy-two centimetre tall, so Xavier’s height must only amount to a little less than a hundred and seventy or around a hundred and sixty-five at worst.

A young lad with a small and meagre build.

He definitely didn’t look like a reliable commander. As he himself was aware of that, he was excessively straightening his back on top of the raptorial dragon this whole time so as to appear taller even just a bit.

Riding as the vanguard with his raptorial dragon gave him the illusion that all the hundred soldiers behind him were observing his every action.

Of course that was entirely his imagination. Even though the sun was only just starting to raise, the foot soldiers had to march on and on amidst the brutal heat, so they could hardly afford to pay any special attention to their spearheading commander. Thus Xavier’s effort was in vain.

“Xavier-sama…”

The young and fair-skinned squire, walking next to him with a spear, looked worried up to Xavier on the raptorial dragon, but Xavier wasn’t composed enough to notice his look right now.

Nonetheless, it was rather impressive how well he sat on the dragon despite his nervous state. A proof that he was well trained in the military arts in spite of his frail appearance.

That said, it would exhaust him sooner or later when he kept up a riding position with strained shoulders over a long time, and provoke mistakes.

“Xavier-sama, it may it bit a early, but I suggest that we take a break. There will be a suitable place for an encampment a little bit ahead, so how about we set up our camp there?”

The one making this proposal while concealing a wry smile, was a middle-aged knight riding on a raptorial dragon at an angle behind Xavier.

His age was probably forty-some. The knight with a deep black moustache was in the prime of his life. Xavier trembled his body with a shiver in reaction to his words and looked over his shoulder.

“Sir Joseph…”

He uttered the name of the knight, a retainer from his father.

Knight Joseph was a veteran soldier with a long military service, who had become renowned in the previous war.

Normally he acted as a close aide to Xavier’s father, Marquis Guzzle, but Queen Aura had sent him, carrying the power of attorney to command the March’s army and the movement order in hand, to the March with her magic.

There was no reason to have a knight of his standing deliver the mere power of attorney and order.

His father most likely sent him to ease the burden on his son for his first operation a little bit.

Xavier appreciated his father’s concern, but at the same time, he felt ashamed.

Shaking off his thoughts that tended to wander into an abject direction, Xavier called out to Joseph.

“Isn’t it a bit too early for that, Sir Joseph? I think the original plan was to cover a bit more distance during the morning.”

The veteran knight had aligned his raptorial dragon next to the son of his lord and spoke with a polite tone to persuade the fledgling, who was tense from nervousness and a sense of duty.

“Indeed, Xavier-sama. That was the plan, but the temperature exceeds our presumption today. The soldiers are already starting to become tired. I believe it would be dangerous to push on any further.”

“I, I see.”

Hearing his subordinate’s suggestion, Xavier raised a voice as if he was caught off-guard.

It was said that the power of observation came with years of experience.

If Xavier had been walking on his own feet, he probably would have noticed the fatigue of the soldiers through his own, but unfortunately he had to preserve his dignity as the commander, so he was riding a raptorial dragon.

Riding a dragon for a long time was quite tiring in itself, too, but it still didn’t compare to the fatigue of the foot soldiers, who were walking under the blazing sun on their own feet.

The young son of the Marquis, properly educated in leadership, nodded with “okay”, then turned around on the back of the dragon and declared to his men following after him with a voice as loud as possible.

“We will set up a camp at the clearance ahead! It’s not that far off, so hang in there!”

They would get to rest when they proceeded just a little farther.

As soon as the soldier understood that, their faces showed delight for the first time today and they weren’t hanging their heads all that much anymore.

Witnessing that, Xavier became aware of his own incompetence once again.

(Oh yeah, looks like everyone’s really tired. I’m just no good. I’ve to notice something like that myself before Sir Joseph mentions it…)

He must have been born with an earnest disposition.

The third son of Marquis Guzzle, Xavier clenched his fists so tightly that his delicate body shook on top of the big raptorial dragon and admonished himself like that.

* * *

Several days later at noon.

The hundred-strong army from the March of Guzzle, lead by Xavier Guzzle, had set up a camp after they had marched considerably far north on the “Salt Road”.

The thick forest on both sides of the “Salt Road” was growing trees in abundance and there were no natural spots to encamp with a hundred people, but the “Salt Road” was still a state road of the Carpa Kingdom in a way.

At set intervals, wide areas had been cleared by cutting down trees, so that a large number of people could pitch up their camp.

The voices of the soldier resounded all over the place on this man-made lawn.

“Hey, the sunblock wall’s too short here. I need someone, who can perform ‘Earth Wall’!”

“We want to start cooking! Someone give us a hand with ‘Ignition‘!”

“We’ve brought the water! Please perform ‘Water Purification’!”

The most noticeable thing for making a camp was “magic” as expected.

Although there were few people worth of the title “magician” by having mastered a lot of spells, there was still a relative great number of people, who could use just one spell convenient for the day-to-day life, even amongst the commoners.

These kind of people were rather useful for pitching up a camp like this.

On the other hand, there was hardly any use for magic once the battle started. After all, the magic required the “correct intonation”, “correct perception” and “correct amount of magical power” to activate.

The “correct intonation” and “correct amount of magical power” aside, it was extremely difficult to sustain the “correct perception” in the middle of a battle.

Only when you were one of the handful elite like the royal court magicians, you could perform offensive magic from the rear of the battlefield, but performing magic while swinging a spear around was principally impossible.

Due to that, the relative importance of magic in the military mainly inclined towards matters outside the battlefield like this.

A temporary headquarter was built by putting up four walls with the “Earth Wall” magic and spanning a white tent over them. Inside of it, Xavier Guzzle sat on a wooden folding chair and was craning his neck after he finally got off the raptorial dragon.

“Kuh…!”

Relieving the tension of his whole body from the long ride, Xavier grimaced in both pain and ease and a sound escaped his mouth.

He had experienced riding for a couple of days during his training numerous times, but he still ended up like this.

As expected, he must have been too worried about the eyes of his men, straining his body more than necessary.

Right now, he was all alone with his trusted squire inside the tent. Since Xavier didn’t have to worry about his men seeing him now, it was an irreplaceable time for him.

A mere tent couldn’t really block off the intense sunlight, but the earth walls raised with magic could perfectly shut it out.

In the shadow of the wall, Xavier doused himself with the water from the small wooden washbowl, which his young squire had prepared for him.

"…Fuh."

The water drops dripped from his short, black hair down onto his neck and from there into his clothes.

"Here, Xavier-sama."

"Oh, thanks, Andrés."

Remaining seated on the folding chair, Xavier took the offered towel from the youthful squire and wiped his wet face with it.

A bit of water like that would dry in no time under the blazing sun, but it would still felt uncomfortable regardless.

After he had wiped his face and neck, the young squire— Andrés took the used towel back in a casual manner and offered him a wooden cup filled with lukewarm water instead.

Xavier drunk the content of the taken cup in one gulp half out of reflex. At that very moment

"Xavier-sama, it's me, Joseph. The advanced reconnaissance party has returned. I would you to hear their report at once. May we come in?"

A low, but clear voice could be heard from beyond the cloth of the tent.

"Oh, Joseph? Yes, come in."

While instructing Andrés, standing at attention next to him, with a glance to tidy up the interior, he called out like that to the knight standing outside the tent.

Inside the makeshift headquarter with its earth walls and cloth ceiling, Xavier Guzzle still sat on the simple folding chair and heard the report from Knight Joseph and a soldier supposedly in his thirties, who was the captain of the reconnaissance party.

"What!? You're saying you found the corpses of the salt merchants?"

Hearing the information from the captain, Xavier leaned a bit forward on his chair and raised a surprised voice.

"Yes, we found a few toppled wagons and dead hulking dragons as well as the corpses of humans on the road ahead! Each of the corpses were heavily injured and it is self-evident that the cause of their deaths was an attack from the carnivore dragons!"

The soldier replied with a loud voice, so that the three-day-old beard around his mouth vibrated.

The advanced reconnaissance party consisted of several light-footed soldiers. It was pretty unlikely that they would be able to retaliate when they encountered the powerful carnivore dragons, which were disrupting the salt road. Therefore, the man said, they had immediately turned on their heels once they discovered the dead merchants.

A wise decision.

Reporting the fact that "the salt merchant were dead on the road ahead" as quickly as possible to the main force took far more priority than gathering more information in that situation.

Sitting on his folding chair, Xavier unconsciously clenched his fists tightly on his lap.

The real battle would finally commence. Of course he was going to be nervous, since it was his first battle.

"I see… Then we can't waste any time. I guess, I ought to put the entire force on the alert."

The young commander said that and stretched his small and frail body on top of the chair.

So as to advice the fledgling knight with the tensed shoulders, the veteran knight spoke.

"Xavier-sama, the soldiers are still preparing lunch. I fear the younger soldiers without experience will be on the edge and unable to get a proper rest when we disclose this information to them now. Shall I proceed nevertheless?"

"Mh?"

Xavier was just about to stand up from the chair, but upon the words from the experienced knight Joseph, he lowered his bottom onto the chair again and mused with his hand against his chin.

It could indeed prove to be difficult for the young and inexperienced soldiers to execute the command, when they were told “The carnivore dragons might be near. Be careful and take a rest”.

To make matters worse, the contingent of “young soldiers” in the body of troops was so large that it couldn’t be ignored.

Die-hard soldiers, who fought in the previous war, were a minority here.

“…Joseph, what’re the odds that the dragons will attack us here?”

The question of the youthful commandant made the long-established knight raise an eyebrow, then

“Well, I cannot say for certain, but I would say it is quite unlikely. We more or less have an army of hundred fully equipped soldiers. The dragons in this area should be fearing us humans quite a bit after all.”

he answered smoothly like that.

“Hmm, I see.”

For a moment, Xavier was about to make some kind of decision after hearing that answer, but Knight Joseph continued and interrupted that resolve.

“However, even if the possibility is low, it does not mean there is ‘none at all’. Who knows what a hungry dragon will do.”

“Hmm…”

Xavier closed his opened mouth again upon Joseph’s words and became absorbed in thought once more.

If they were to put the entire body of soldiers on the alert, a bunch of soldiers would be unable to make the most of the long-awaited break. But if they didn’t do it, they were at risk of being attacked off-guard by the carnivore dragons.

Put them on the alert, or not?

Xavier suppressed the impulse to ask the veteran knight in front of him what he ought to do, and pondered.

Joseph already had given him his objective opinion. As the commander, Xavier himself had to make a decision.

“….”

While he was thinking, the numbers “1, 2, 3, 4…” started to dance in the back of his head.

That was a habit, which was drummed into him by his teacher for military leadership.

Contrary to the duties of a landlord, who was supposed to consider matters carefully, a swift decision from the commander on the battlefield was often better than an elaborated one.

“A decision on the battlefield should always be made within ten seconds. And at the sight of the enemy, it is required to make a decision within three seconds.”

His military teacher had driven that doctrine into Xavier till he was blue in the face.

Before long, Xavier exhaled a big breath and straightened his back on top of the chair, then gave his orders to his subordinate before him.

“Okay. No need to put the soldiers on the alert. Only pass on the information to the knights and unit leaders. Let the other soldiers finish their lunch and recharge their energy as always.

In the afternoon, we’ll head to the scene of the assault. It’s quite likely that fighting will break out.

Once the lunch break’s over, we’ll disclose the report from just now to the entire body of soldiers and march along on the alert. That’s all.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Very well.”

The captain of the advanced reconnaissance party and Knight Joseph respectfully affirmed the decision of their commandant.

Having given his order, Xavier strained his faced so much that his cheeks were seized with cramps, doing his best as not to show his anxiety.

Right after he finished his sentence, a doubt towards his own decision swelled up inside of him.

Was this really the right decision?

Now that he had given the order, it would undoubtedly be his fault if the "carnivore dragons" were to attack them during their break.

However, it would also be his fault if the new soldiers didn't get to rest due to the announcement of the information, interfering with the operation in the afternoon as a result.

Whether they knew of these worries of the inexperienced commander or not, Knight Joseph and the captain of the reconnaissance party bowed once, then quickly left the tent.

"…..Fuh. The fighting hasn't even started yet and I'm already like this…"

The tactful, young squire pretended to have not heard the unwitting grumble of his lord at all.

* * *

The hundred-strong army from the March of Guzzle, led by Xavier Guzzle, had halted in the middle of the "Salt Road" under the blazing sun.

Approximately one hour had passed, since they had resumed their march after the break at noon.

To put the scene in front of Xavier's party in a nutshell: "Terrific".

Several freight wagons were toppled and blocked the road.

The hulking dragons were dead, still hitched up to the wagons with leather straps.

The torn burlap bags with salt were scattered all around.

And lastly, the corpses of many humans laid near the wagons.

The sad end of the salt merchants.

Quite a few days must have passed since the attack. The corpses were slowly decaying and gave off a strong stench.

It was unapparent to the untrained eye whether the missing parts on the corpses were due to the carnivore dragons' bites or due to the decomposition of the flesh.

The black insects crawling here and there through the rotten flesh, which had dissolved into a reddish brown colour, were a swarm of flesh flies and the white spots in patches were a colony of eggs laid by the flesh flies.

The sound of several wing beats, the kind that tingled inside the ear, could be heard in the wind when one pricked up his ears.

"Agh…!"

"Ugh…"

"Don't throw up! If you let this wear you out, you'll be a drag in the battle later on!"

"Just you dare to throw up the good food! I'll beat it back into you until it comes out of your ears!"

At the rear, the veteran soldiers were giving the fledgling soldiers, who struggled against nausea, a harsh pep talk.

Notwithstanding their greenness, they were all born in the borderland, where the forces of nature were at work. The majority of them must have seen the corpse of a dragon before, not to mention the one of a human.

Thus the reason for their nausea ought to be the stench.

When flesh decayed, it brought about a putrid smell. The stench tainted the air so much richer than a sweet-and-sour or fishy smell could ever hope to achieve. So it was only understandable that the young soldiers were seized with the feeling of wanting to vomit their stomach contents all over the road, as they weren't used to it.

In fact, even Xavier would have succumbed to the boiling urge of his stomach, if not for his "sense of duty" and "vanity", which corded up his gullet.

While the young commandant fought an inner battle with his stomach on top of the raptorial dragon, the veteran knight spoke as expected, to remind him of his duties.

"Xavier-sama, your orders please."

The middle-aged knight skilfully steered his own raptorial dragon near Xavier and urged the novice commander with a slightly harsh tone.

Recalling the duty he had to fulfil through Knight Jospeh's frank words, Xavier suddenly seemed to come back to his senses and took a deep breath. Then he gave his orders.

"Y- Yes. Have the inspection team come to the front and examine the corpses. I want a report once they analyzed the situation. The other soldiers will keep watch on the surroundings."

"Roger!"

"You heard the man, guys! The first squad will keep a watch on the east of the road, the second squad on the west! Third and fourth squads will guard the supply corps at the rear!"

"Clear the road. The inspection team is coming through."

The troops went into action as soon as they heard the orders from Xavier in a slightly falsetto voice.

The men of the inspection team trotted over to the corpses, whereupon the swarm of flesh flies, which had huddled together on the corpses like a layer of mud so far, took off all at once. The vicinity turned dark as if covered by a black fog.

The term inspection team sounded rather scientific, but in reality, it wasn't anything that fancy. Their members were actually "skilled hunters".

But there was no one, who was more knowledgeable about this kind of thing than the hunters with hands-on experience.

They could determine the species in question from evidences like bite marks or excrements, and estimate their numbers from the state of the victims. Moreover, they could even give a rough estimate for how long the victim had been dead based on the progress of the decomposition of the corpse.

That knowledge wasn't acquired through systematic studies, but rather through practical experiences, but it didn't hurt its credibility in any way.

Before long, the hunters of the inspection team came up to Xavier.

If this had been the royal capital or the mansion in the March, it would've called for the proper etiquette, but laxity was more or less tolerated on the frontlines.

A middle-aged man with a brown three-day stubble spoke as the representative of the hunters standing in front of Xavier.

"Reporting in. We believe it were 'Pack Dragons' that attacked the salt merchants."

Xavier's cheeks twitched upon hearing the words from the middle-aged hunter.

"Pack Dragon".

Everyone here had heard of that name before. The carnivore dragon was that popular in the western part of the South Continent.

There was always an exception to the rule, but as a rough classification, the majority of herbivore dragons like the "Hulking Dragon" or "Raptorial Dragons" walked on four legs, whereas the carnivore dragons usually walked on two. And the "Pack Dragon", a carnivore dragon, was no exception to this, either.

When full-grown, the dragon was a head or two taller than a human.

It stood upright on two thick legs, which had a strong jumping power, and balanced its body out with a long tail. Besides the sharp claws on its short forelegs, it also had jagged fangs. It used these to prey on its target.

To match it with an animal from Earth: A “kangaroo” would probably mirror its silhouette the most.

Amongst all the carnivore dragons, the “Pack Dragon” belonged to the smaller kind, but it didn’t change the fact that it was still a threat to humans.

Just like the name “Pack Dragon” implied, these dragons usually stayed together as a pack.

It was a common problem that the livestock from villages in the borderlands, namely the “Hulking Dragons” and “Meat Dragons”, were assaulted by the “Pack Dragons” and when a villager was attacked by a carnivore dragon inside the forest, then it was in all likelihood the “Pack Dragons”, too.

However, Xavier knew a bit about the nature and ecology of the “Pack Dragons”, so he inclined his head puzzled on top of his raptorial dragon in reaction to the report from the hunter.

“‘Pack Dragons’, you say? Are you sure?”

The bearded hunter confidently agreed with the question of the commandant.

“Yes. There is no doubt. We could not really tell anything from the corpses of the people, because they were too decayed, but the skin of the hulking dragon does not decompose so easily. We found marks from bites and claws. The assault came undoubtedly from ‘Pack Dragons’.”

The hunters, experts on the topic, assured it with such emphasis. There could be no doubt then.

However, it still didn’t clear up Xavier’s doubt.

“I see. If you say so, I shall believe you. But I don’t get it. The salt merchants were all killed by mere ‘Pack Dragons’? Their escort was supposed to be quite numerous and skilled.”

Xavier said that and let his gaze wander over the corpses of the salt merchants lying around.

The corpses were already so decayed or eaten up that it was no longer possible to distinguish between a merchant or a guard, but judging from the scattered wreckage of short spears and bows, there had been an substantial fighting force.

As part of his training, Xavier had once repelled “Pack Dragons”, but based on this experience, he found it hard to imagine how a force of this size failed to repulse these “Pack Dragons”.

However, the bearded hunter shook his head with a stern expression.

“Xavier-sama, the size of a pack solely depends on the calibre of the alpha leader. Most of the alpha leaders only make packs with a size of ten, at best, but some old and full grown alpha leaders can have twenty to thirty dragons in their pack.

The alpha leader of such a huge pack doesn’t just have to be big and strong. The important part is whether he can feed all of them or not. In most cases, the leader is abnormally smart and they hunt cunningly.”

“Then the pack that attacked these merchants…”

Comprehending the situation through the explanation from the hunter, Xavier darkened his expression.

“Yes. It must have been a large pack led by a great alpha leader. It is easily conceivable that even the good escorts of the salt merchants were defeated, when twenty or thirty coordinated “Pack Dragons” attacked them.

As you can see, the road is flanked by trees.

So it is not all that strange if they were killed without resistance in a surprise attack.”

“Twenty to thirty, huh.”

The hunter with the stubbles explained, whereupon Xavier mumbled and made a serious expression with a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

However, the hunter shook his head once more while keeping an indifferent face.

“Not quite. Xavier-sama. The twenty to thirty would be the bare minimum. But this time, I would at least estimate the pack to actually have over ‘fifty’ dragons.”

“Fifty, you say!? Your reason being?”

As the number exceeded his forecast by far, Xavier made no secret of his surprise.

On a closer look, even the other hunters were looking surprised upon the utterance from the bearded hunter. In other words, it was the sole opinion of the hunter with the beard.

As if he had waited for Xavier’s question, the stubble hunter eloquently presented his own theory.

“I’m sure you can see it from here. Please take a look at the dead hulking dragons that were pulling the freight wagons of the salt merchants. Although it’s not all of them, various of them have bite wounds on their back, right?

The flesh there is chewy and unappetizing. Most of the carnivore dragons wouldn’t eat that part, unless there’s not enough.

But they got quite a bit of humans and eight hulking dragons here. Despite that, they even mangled the backs of the hulking dragons. That means…”

“The pack was so big that the tender meat from the numerous humans and hulking dragons wasn’t enough to satisfy all of them?”

“Yes, that’s what I believe.”

“And you say there are more than fifty of them?”

“That’s merely a rough estimate from me, though. But I think it needs to be at least this much, considering that the merchants, coachmen, back staff, soldiers and the tender and delicious meat from the eight hulking dragons didn’t fill their stomachs.”

“Hmm…”

Even if it was a rough estimate, the words of the bearded hunter were convincing, so Xavier bit his bottom lip and pondered with a serious expression.

A pack of fifty dragons.

If that forecast turned out to be true, then it was a formidable enemy even for the hundred-strong army led by Xavier.

Of course they wouldn’t be defeated. However, young soldiers were a valuable asset to the Carpa Kingdom, since it wasn’t all that long ago that the previous war had ended.

The acceptable loss of human resources was slim.

Marquis Guzzle had deemed the current incident as a “beneficial obstacle for getting his son an achievement”, so he had kind of forcefully pushed it through that his own army would get to resolve the incident, but depending on the future development, Xavier might have to pick the lesser evil.

There were basically two choices: Prioritize his achievement and let valuable soldiers of his domain die. Or throw away his achievement and request the help from the royal army to protect the lives of his soldiers.

(It’s not easy.)

At heart, Xavier put the lives of his soldiers over his own achievement, but he was aware that he was in no position to make such a decision based on emotion.

In the not so distant future, he would inherit the Marquis title and “gaining a reputation” was directly interconnected with protecting the interests of the March of Guzzle within the Carpa Kingdom.

His reputation or the lives of his soldiers?

Of course the best outcome would be when he earned his reputation without letting his soldiers die, but it was more than unlikely that he would be able to complete the subjugation without casualties if the enemy really was “a pack of fifty Pack Dragons” like the bearded hunter had speculated.

Xavier realized that his train of thought was hitting a dead-end, so he concentrated on comprehending the situation before his eyes for now.

“Okay. Either way, we have to dispose of the corpses and wagons first or we can’t march on.”

He skilfully turned around the dragon he was riding on the spot and declared that in a loud voice to his subordinates standing in the back.

Hearing his orders, Knight Joseph immediately added more detailed instructions.

“You heard the man. Those with an axe, clear an area big enough for cremation.

Those that can use ‘Parch’ or ‘Wind Blade’, chop the felled trees into firewood for the cremation.

After that, carry the corpses and wagon wreckages over there and use ‘Ignition’ on them. Don’t forget to wear masks and gloves when you move the corpses. Don’t you dare to touch them with your bare hands, unless you want to die from the poison in the corpses.

Also, burn the scattered salt, too. It’s likely to have been polluted by the corpses as well.

And be careful that none of the fires spreads to the surroundings. Have someone with ‘Spring of Water’ be on standby just in case.

The rest of you keeps a watch on the vicinity.

Got it? Good.

…Do you have anything to add, Xavier-sama?”

“N- No.”

Even while being a bit overwhelmed by the precise instructions from Knight Joseph, the addressed Xavier didn’t forget his own position and took a deep breath, then

“Commence!”

he declared the execution with a loud voice.

* * *

By the time the intense sun of the hot season started to decline in the west, black smoke was trailing over the decayed corpses and wrecked wagons on the side of the “Salt Road”.

“Heavy-ho!”

The young soldiers were sweating all over as they pulled the ropes tied around the stinking corpses over “rollers” made from felled trees cut into the right length.

The abrasive rope cut into the shoulders of the soldiers, who were clenching their teeth and bending over so much that their chests nearly touched their knees.

The sweat streamed down their cheeks and dripped from their chins onto the dry soil, soaking it black here and there.

However, these sweat blotches dried up in no time.

And the scorching sun wasn’t the only reason for that. The decayed corpses and wrecked freight wagons were burned together in one big fire.

A heat that wasn’t even found in a forge, hung over the clearing on the site of the road, improvised by cutting down some trees.

Smoke was raising and the air was flickering from the red flames.

“Seems we’ll get to clear the road without problems.”

Xavier said that while he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a dry towel.

The rotten corpses had all been thrown onto the fire. At first, the horrible stench had brought tears to his eyes, but now he didn’t feel anything in particular.

The stench from the rotten flesh had certainly become weaker, but more likely, his nose had quit the service and he just couldn’t smell the stench anymore.

Anyway, the functionality of the road was restored for now.

As the criteria for one task were met, Xavier regained a bit of his composure and averted his gaze from the blazing flame.

Then he noticed something.

“Mh?”

The hunter with the beard stubble, who had explained the assault earlier, was tilting his head puzzled with a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

He must have felt Xavier’s look on him. Without even being called, he came trotting to in front of Xavier.

“Xavier-sama, I’ve something to report.”

Judging by the sour face he made, it surely were unpleasant news again, but in his position, Xavier had to listen to it regardless.

“Speak.”

He immediately urged him to speak up with an expression as if he had swallowed a bitter medicine.

Called upon, the bearded hunter briefly lowered his head with “Yes, Sir”, then started in a slightly quick tone.

“Something is weird, Xavier-sama. At first I thought it was just a coincidence, but the wheels or axles of all three freight wagons were broken, so that they couldn’t move anymore.”

“Oh, that.”

Xavier gave a short affirmative reply to the words of the bearded hunter.

As a matter of fact, he had noticed that, too. At first, he had wanted to use the broken wagons to transport the corpses.

However, there wasn’t a single wagon left that was functioning properly.

He simply dismissed it as “bad luck”, but the hunter with the beard seemed to have a different opinion on it.

“Sure, it isn’t all that strange that all wagons get damaged beyond functionality by chance, since it was a large-scale assault. But as far as I can see, it seems that the ‘Pack Dragons’ destroyed the wheels of each wagon by trusting their ‘claws’ and ‘fangs’ into it.”

The wheels didn’t break from a driving error of the coachmen, but were deliberately attacked by the Pack Dragons.

There was only one reason why they would do that.

“You mean, they wanted to immobilize them? Are the Pack Dragons really that smart?”

“Yes. I find it hard to believe, too, but it would be better when we assume so. There are actually a few more points that confirm their high intelligence.”

“What do you mean?”

In reaction to Xavier’s enquiry, the bearded hunter deepened the wrinkle between his eyebrows and continued with a grim tone.

“Look around. There isn’t a single corpse of a Pack Dragon. In other words, that means the escorts of the salt merchant were one-sidedly killed without even defeating one dragon.”

“And that’s something impossible?”

The hunter with the beard mused over Xavier’s question, then shook his head.

“No, I wouldn’t go as far as calling it impossible. As you can see, the road is small and flanked by densely growing trees. If an coordinated pack of Pack Dragons attacked from both sides at the same time, it’s conceivable that the escorts were wiped out without getting to retaliate.

Though, only on the assumption that all the escorts had let their guard down.”

After finishing his sentence, the bearded hunter inclined his head as if he himself wasn’t quite convinced by what he had said.

It certainly was weird. Of course it was inevitable that the soldiers would grow weary when they advanced on a peaceful road for a long time, but even so, it would mean that the soldiers hired by the salt merchants were extremely weak when they let their guard down so much that the "Pack Dragons" could perfectly carry out a surprise attack.

Something was clearly fishy about that, even if it wasn't impossible.

That in turn naturally raised the plausibility of another theory to explain the current situation.

"With this in mind, I believe that the reason why we didn't find any dead Pack Dragons, lies with the dragons, too, not the 'off-guard escort'."

"The reason lies with the dragons…"

Xavier was about to ask "what reason specifically?", when it happened.

"A flying dragon in the sky from north-north-east!"

The loud voice from the outlook soldier resounded through the vicinity.

"!?"

Xavier's look reflexively turned to the north-north-eastern sky. There it was.

A black spot was hanging all alone in the glorious blue sky of the hot season.

The silhouette only looked like a black dot at first, but it gradually grew bigger and its finer outline became noticeable.

A long neck. A long tail. And wings so big that they probably could cover eighty percent of its whole body.

It was without a doubt a winged dragon. And one in a different league than the "Small Flying Dragon" that humans used for communication: A genuine Flying Dragon.

"All hands, prepare for anti-air combat in small groups! Archers, nock an arrow and wait for the signal!"

Xavier gave the whole team orders so smoothly that it even surprised him inwardly.

His orders were nothing but the standard protocol for when the army encountered a flying dragon, but his speed of reaction was quite alright for a greenhorn on his first mission.

"A flying dragon!?"

"Why here?"

"Damnit, was it lured here by the smoke!?"

Even with shouting all over the place, the soldiers took up a defensive stance like Xavier had ordered. They formed small groups and put up their short spears above their heads, so that it looked like hedgehogs.

"Xavier-sama! Over here!"

"Yes, Andrès. You, too!"

Xavier jumped off his raptorial dragon and pulled on the hand by his squire Andrès, he slipped into the phalanx formation of the commandant's personal squad.

"Fuh…"

Surrounding by his subordinates with readied spears, Xavier got his favoured short bow from his squire Andrès and took a deep breath. Then he mumbled to himself while keeping his eyes on the Flying Dragon in the sky.

"I didn't expect a Flying Dragon. What's it doing here in the forest…"

He wasn't whimpering or anything.

The large Flying Dragons mainly hunted on plains with good visibility and rarely appeared in a forest like this.

Because it was nearly impossible for them to land in the dense forest with their enormous, membranous wings.

Due to that, the party was pretty much equipped with short spears and short bows, not expecting to fight against a Flying Dragon like Xavier had mentioned.

If they were going to fight against a Flying Dragon, they ought to have long spears instead of short spears and longbows instead of short bows.

“Based on its flight characteristics, it does not seem like it’s hunting here. I think it’s on its way to hunt on a nearby plain.”

The bearded hunter had appeared next to Xavier at some point with a short bow in hand. He was taking a knee and said that to Xavier with a tensed voice while watching the Flying Dragon in the sky.

“It isn’t after us?”

Xavier asked him, whereupon the hunter nodded shortly while cautiously keeping the dragon in sight.

“I doubt it. Of course we can’t be careless, but hunting humans inside a forest is quite dangerous for a Flying Dragon, too.”

It normally tended to be misunderstood, but in reality, the large Flying Dragons weren’t all that much of a threat to an army.

Of course its kind was without a doubt a tough enemy and extremely difficult to deal with for humans, since it swooped down on them from the untouchable sky domain, but the damaged inflicted on an army that way wasn’t all too severe.

Think about it. The Flying Dragon was a dragon that flew through the sky. Its prey was limited to ones with a weight that the dragon could lift up with its claws after all.

So even when a Flying Dragon attacked a group of humans, the actual damage usually amounted to one or two people, three at most.

In fact, travelling merchants, who couldn’t hire enough escorts, normally brought one or two old “Hulking Dragons” along as a “sacrifice” to the Flying Dragon when they crossed over a plain.

To paraphrase it with heartless words: This army would lose not more than three people, even when they were attacked by a Flying Dragon now. From the “military” point of view, it was impossible to sustain any major causalities, unless a vital and irreplaceable person like Xavier or Knight Joseph was amongst the victims.

Nevertheless, it was hardly a comfort for the individual soldier.

There was a chance of 1:100 or 2:100 to get killed by a Flying Dragon. Be it spearman, archer or supplier, “everyone” alike watched the Flying Dragon and focussed on the “sky” in fear of that.

“…..”

Amidst that nerve-wracking silence, only the sound from the flapping wings of the dragon flying in the sky rang out loudly.

A few archers were readjusting their aim in a posture that looked like they would fall flat onto the ground of the road at any moment. The point “right above the head” was a blind spot for an archer. An exceptional skill was required to shoot straight upwards while standing.

Fortunately however, their alertness came to nothing now.

Considering the eyesight of the Flying Dragon, it was impossible that it didn’t notice them. Just like the hunter had said, the Flying Dragon must not have wanted to dive into the narrow road with trees densely growing on both sides, either.

The Flying Dragon flew past them, far over their heads.

“…..Fuh.”

Once the silhouette of the dragon was completely out of sight, Xavier unwittingly made a sigh of relief.

And he wasn’t the only one.

The tension from the encounter with an unexpected difficulty eased in the entire body of soldiers when they got out of that difficulty without any problems. At that very moment.

“HISS!”

A couple of large silhouettes attacked Xavier’s party from both side of the road.

“They” jumped with their two thick legs from the shadow of the trees high into the sky over the party’s heads in a single bound and squashed the totally off-guard soldiers from above just like that.

“UWAH!?”

“HII!?”

“GAH….!”

Crushing the soldiers underfoot, “they” revealed their appearance on the road.

The whole body was covered by green scales and it was one head taller than a human: A two-legged carnivore dragon.

The Pack Dragon.

Seven Pack Dragons in total, three from the right and four from the left, flattened seven soldiers under their thick legs and drooled from their mouths that were showing off their sharp fangs.

When did they had hidden themselves on the side of the road? Maybe they had closed in from the forest while the party had been distracted by the Flying Dragon in the sky?

In that case, the alpha leader of these Pack Dragons even used the movement pattern of the Flying Dragon, which was actually supposed to be their feared enemy as well, to their advantage.

“Wh- What…!?”

Whatever the real circumstances were, it still took a few more moments until the novice commandant aka Xavier adopted to the sudden development.

The Pack Dragons had made a surprise attack while everyone was focussed on the Flying Dragon in the sky.

They succeeded in such a cunning assault that it was hardly imaginable that these dragons lived based on instincts. The first wave of their attack had hit several soldiers with their claws.

Now it made sense. If they could perform such a perfect surprise attack, it was understandable that the guards of the salt merchants ended up dead without resistance, too.

To the point that the young commander Xavier considered such heedless things in the back of his otherwise blank mind.

However, even if the escorts of the salt merchants had been quite skilled, they neither were as good as the proficient knights, nor as numerous.

There was no way that the surprise attack from the Pack Dragons, which had wiped out the merchant party, would also be able to slay the hundred-strong March army led by Xavier.

“…All hands, engage! The shield soldiers take position towards the forest, the spearmen attack from behind them! The archers shoot from within the formation! Don’t let the Pack Dragons near the wagons!”

Snapping back to his senses, Xavier issued commands with a cracked voice.

“Roger!”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Understood. Supplier! Make sure to replenish the arrows!”

Upon hearing their commandant, the soldiers seemed to recall their duties now and gradually acted like they were supposed to again.

The battle had started with the surprise attack by the Pack Dragons, but the tide was slowly changing.

Xavier was leading a pure military party with the mission to subjugate dragons. Once they recovered from the surprise attack, they were not beaten so easily.

“Shield soldiers, form a wall!”

“Spearmen, fall back! Focus on keeping them in check rather than attacking them!”

“Archers, shoot! Dragons that are attacking a fallen comrade take priority! Don’t hesitate to shoot! Your fellow soldier will be done for anyway when the dragon drags him into the forest!”

As soon as Xavier and the others changed over to an organized counterattack after coming back to their senses, the battle was locked in stalemate.

The soldiers had taken up position with short spears and large, wooden shield at both side of the road and the Pack Dragons had quickly retreated into the forest, where they were sticking out their long necks from in-between the tress and raising shrill GYAA noises that hurt the ears.

The archers with their short bows at the rear were sometimes sending arrows when they saw an opening, but the branches or the leafage of the trees were in the way and barely any arrows hit the Pack Dragons.

In some rare cases, an arrow slipped through the territorial defence and hit a dragon, but in the end, it lacked power, since it was shot with a short bow.

Its draw weight lacked the power to kill the dragon, who had a thick skin and a sturdy skeletal structure despite his medium size, with one shot.

“GRAAH!”

An unlucky Pack Dragon was hit by an arrow and red blood shed from the wound as it shrieked, but it was far from being a lethal injury.

Xavier kept his gaze on the Pack Dragons and his subordinates, who were glaring at each other at the boundary line between the forest and the road, while he called out to the knight aiming with a bow next to him.

“Joseph, how many did we lose?”

“Only one for sure. He was dragged alive into the forest earlier. Otherwise we have five wounded from the initial surprise attack. They can’t fight anymore, but their lives aren’t in immediate danger. Right now, they’re resting on the supply wagons.”

Knight Joseph replied like that with a plain tone while he kept the arrowhead and his sharp eyes aimed at the Pack Dragon in the shadows of the trees.

As a veteran knight, Joseph was using a “Dragon Bow”.

It wasn’t any bigger than the short bow from the other soldiers, but its draw weight and range was even higher than a longbow, not to mention the short bow. Truly a masterpiece.

And it was even possible to kill a Pack Dragon with a single arrow as long as it hit the right spot.

As a matter of fact, one of the dead Pack Dragons lying on the road right now was slain by Joseph’s arrow.

Xavier, too, was itching to use his bow, but his reasoning suppressed that urge and he was getting a hold of the situation instead. Going on the attack would mean to concentrate on a single target for at least a moment.

When an inexperienced commander like Xavier narrowed his field of vision like that, it could cause fatal troubles for the force.

Xavier only exerted himself to get a grasp of the current situation.

(Counting the dead and wounded, we lost six men in total. Not a number that leaves us unable to fight. We already set up a perimeter defence. After that… it became a stalemate.)

At present, Xavier’s army couldn’t lessen the number of Pack Dragons as these had retreated into the forest, but likewise, the Pack Dragons were unable to make a successful attack on them, too.

“We do have prepared the suitable equipment to get into the forest when the situation calls for it…”

Maybe he had gotten impatient over the stalemate, but Xavier unconsciously muttered that.

“I can’t say I agree. These Pack Dragons are better organized than we thought. I’m not saying we would lose when we fight in their territory, the forest, but it would undoubtedly cost us dearly.”

However, the experienced knight standing next to him dismissed the utterance from the young commandant.

Xavier himself must have realized how dangerous his idea was, too.

He simply replied with a short “right” to Knight Joseph and abandoned his plan.

“But what do we do then? At this rate, the stalemate won’t break. And our supply of arrows is limited.”

“I think we can keep it like this for a while. Sure, they’re strangely numerous and coordinated, but that‘s all to it. If the stalemate continues, the first one to get impatient will surely be…”

their side, was what he was going to say when one Pack Dragon stuck out its long neck from the forest to snap at a short spear and exposed its head on the edge of the road, as if to meet Joseph’s anticipation.

“Hah!”

Knight Joseph didn’t let this opportunity slide. He quickly let an arrow loose from his dragon bow, which went into the head of the Pack Dragon.

“GYAH!?”

Pretty much like a horizontal flash of light, the arrow perfectly pierced the Pack Dragon’s skin on its head and dug deeply into the skull. In contrast to the human brain, the brain of a Pack Dragon was incomparable small, so even a headshot was often not lethal, but luck seemed to be on his side this time.

Shot in the head by Knight Joseph, the Pack Dragon protruded its upper body beyond the shades of the trees and tumbled down.

“Ohh!”

“Nothing less from Joseph-sama!”

The soldiers morale went up remarkably when there was finally a triumph after the long stalemate.

“Well done, Joseph. I thought they were clever, but some of them are quite careless, too, I guess.”

While praising him, the young commandant spoke out his doubt with an inclined head, whereupon Knight Joseph quickly drew another arrow from the quiver on his back and showed an audacious grin.

“In the end, they’re just dragons. No matter how smart the alpha leader is, the underlings are just animals acting on instinct. They won’t comply with a ‘waiting’ order forever, even if its an order from their scary leader.”

“I see. So they cracked under the pressure of the stalemate first.”

The wrinkles between Xavier’s eyebrows slackened a bit upon the first bright news after the start of the battle.

He observed the forest with a bit calmer look and it certainly felt like the silhouettes of the Pack Dragons, hiding between the trees, had moved somewhat closer to the road than before.

In the meantime, another Pack Dragon reached the limit of its patience and leaped onto the road while roaring and spilling drool from its widely-opened mouth.

“GRAAH!”

But when a single Pack Dragon came out onto the road, it was playing directly into the hands of the waiting soldiers.

“Now!”

“Take this!”

“There!”

The archers let it rain arrows from their drawn bows and the closest spearman threw the short spear in his right hand with all his might at close range in order to finish it off.

“HGI…!”

The careless Pack Dragon looked like a hedgehog with all the arrows stuck in its entire body and breathed its last when the thrown spear deeply pierced his torso in the end.

“Good, keep it up!”

These encouraging words unwittingly left Xavier’s mouth.

If the impatient Pack Dragons came out little by little like this, they could conveniently slay them one by one.

Such an optimistic hope took shape in his mind. However, a loud roar resounded over the road from the forest, nipping that hope in the bud.

“GUAAAAAH!”

That roar was more than just loud. It had a clear intent and order embedded in it, which distinguished it from the simple howling of a beast.

“Xavier-sama, to your right!”

In reaction to the words of the young squire Andrés, Xavier reflexively turned his eyes to the forest on his right, where he saw a silhouette deep inside the forest.

“!?”

Xavier unconsciously swallowed his saliva.

“It’s… huge.”

“Yes.

The trees were thwarting a clear sight, but from its silhouette alone, it became apparent that “it” was not a common creature.

It ought to be standing far behind the other Pack Dragons, which had come as close to the road as possible, but on a glance, it looked like it had the same size like the other dragons or was even a bit bigger at worst.

Normally, the alpha leader of the Pack Dragons was one head bigger than the typical Pack Dragon, but this one was probably even two heads bigger than the typical alpha leader.

The Pack Dragon was usually classified as a “medium-sized carnivore dragon”, but this alpha leader was a bit too big to be called medium-sized. With its size, it was more fit to be called a “large-sized carnivore dragon on the small side”.

“GARUUIII!!”

While Xavier and the others were captivated by its huge silhouette, the alpha leader let another loud howl resound through the area.

In the next moment then, the Pack Dragons, snorting in the shadows of the trees near the edge of the road, were backing off all at once.

They were retreating? The soldiers instinctively started to relax, so Xavier reflexively called out to them.

“Don’t let your guard down! All hands, stay alert!”

His instructions were by no means wrong. If anything, it was praiseworthy that he, as a fledgling commander, immediately felt the tension of the troops plummeting and decided to reprimand them at once.

Fortunately however, that caution turned out to be futile.

RUSTLE. The noise of swaying branches and undergrowth gradually faded into the distance.

“…..”

“…..”

Once the noise had completely vanished, Xavier slowly counted till ten, then asked Knight Joseph and the bearded hunter next to him for confirmation.

“…Did they… really retreat?”

The two of them nodded in unison.

“Yes, all their presences have vanished.”

“The howl earlier was the sign to retreat. The Pack Dragons basically don’t come back for the same prey right away when they’ve given up on it once.”

With the certification from the knight, a professional soldier, and the hunter, an expert for dragons, Xavier finally relaxed his shoulders, too.

“I see. Everyone, stand at ease. Give me a report on the casualties after treating the wounded.”

As soon as Xavier uttered these words, the soldiers, now a little less than a hundred, relaxed as they sunk down to the floor.

* * *

The sun was sinking to the west and its reddish rays shone upon Xavier’s party while they were dealing with the aftermath of the operation.

Treating the wounded was especially difficult.

“Okay, I’m going to rinse it. Clench your teeth.”

“AGH!?”

The clothes of the wounded soldiers were ripped, the laid open wounds were rinsed with a lot of water and the bleedings were stopped by wrapping a clean cloth around it.

Those with a fracture were held down by a few people and had their bone set, then it was stabilized by tying a splint to it with a piece of cloth.

Right now, only this kind of treatment was possible here. But depending on the time and place, even this treatment could make the difference between life and death.

Before long, the supply corps had finished treating all the wounded soldiers and their captain came over to Xavier for a report.

“Xavier-sama, we have finished the treatment of the wounded. For now, no one’s life is in immediate danger. Time will tell their fate.”

Xavier replied to the captain of the supply corps with “well done”. His face showed an obvious complexion of relief.

After all, it were good news that the injuries of the wounded soldiers weren’t fatal.

But of course there was no knowing what would happen, just like the captain had said. People that were wounded by the claws or fangs of dragons, often caught a high fever later on. A fever attack was a sufficient cause of death for a soldier weakened by an injury.

Xavier felt the urge to visit the wounded, but on a second thought, there were other things that took priority, so he continued the conversation.

“What about the wagons? Can you repair them?”

“Yes. Luckily only one wagon has its wheel damaged by claws, so we can get it running again with a spare wheel for now. Well, we need to exchange the whole wagon when we reach a town, though.”

The captain answered Xavier’s question like that and scratched his head.

The supply corps wasn't just responsible for transporting supplies. It was a group of specialized personnel from which some could repair armours, weapons or broken wagons on the spot when necessary, too.

In a way, all the men from the supply corps had the most outstanding performance in this battle.

Because they had kept the "Hulking Dragons", which were pulling the wagons, under control the whole time when they were surrounded by the Pack Dragons.

The squires had accomplished a similar deed by soothing the "Raptorial Dragons", the mounts of the knights, but it sure didn't compare to the troubles of the coachmen. The "Raptorial Dragons" of the knights were trained for combat, whereas the "Hulking Dragons" were only drilled for manual labour. Their adaptabilities towards combat were in different leagues.

Their effort deserved some kind of reward later on. As not to forget it, Xavier made a memo in his mind and questioned the captain of the supply corps.

"Okay. We're moving out as soon as the wagon is repaired. Sorry, but be quick with it. It'll be no laughing matter when the spilled blood attracts other dragons now. Ah, another thing, I want the wounded to be transported on the wagons. Is that possible?"

The captain of the supply corpse mused for a bit upon his question, then approved.

"Yes, that should work out. We haven't utilized the full capacity of the wagons to begin with and the freight lessened as we have used large amounts of water here, even if that's not something to be happy about."

"Right, the water is a problem, too… Okay. I'll leave the repairs of the wagon and the transport of the wounded to you. Do what you can."

"Yes, Sir!"

The supply corps' captain replied with a loud voice, then rushed back to the freight wagons.

"….."

Xavier watched the back of the leaving captain for a bit, but before long, he turned his gaze forward again.

"Joseph."

"Yes?"

"It would be reckless to give chase with what we have, right?"

Rather than a question, Xavier's sentence was closer to confirming what he was already convinced of. The veteran knight nodded short in response.

"Yes. We do know the identity of our enemy now, so we may succeed to some extent when we proceed with caution, but our casualties would definitely exceed a tolerable level."

The forest was the territory of the dragons. Slaying close to fifty coordinated Pack Dragons with a bit less than hundred men was a bit too difficult.

Thus, Xavier made a decision, albeit biting his bottom lip regretfully.

"…Okay. My subjugation is a failure. We will ask the royal army for support."

"Understood."

Knight Joseph was about to add "a wise decision", but swallowed these words.

The young commandant had thrusted aside his regret at the last moment and made a rational decision, so these words might have only sounded like sarcasm to him.

Even if these words were meant as a genuine praise, it was better not to speak them out when there was a possibility that the other party would misunderstand its intention.

As Knight Joseph stayed silent, Xavier spoke while still gazing beyond the road.

"Once the wagon is repaired, we march on. Have them get ready, so we can leave any time."

"Roger that. Are we going to turn back to the main town of the March?"

Xavier retained a rigid expression and shook his head to Joseph's question.

“No, far from it. We’ll follow the road into the royal domain. That way, we can have a doctor look after the wounded more quickly.”

“Certainly.”

The veteran knight concealed his inner thoughts on the decision of the youthful commander and raised an impressed voice without protesting.

In fact, Xavier was by no means wrong.

If they simply wanted to reach the nearest settlement, then making an U-turn here would be the fastest way, but following the road straight ahead like this towards the border of the royal domain was the best choice if the aim was “the nearest place with a physician”.

There was a relatively large military installation on the border of the royal domain and these installations in the Carpa Kingdom had at least one physician stationed there.

The worry about the wounded soldier undoubtedly occupied a majority of Xavier’s mind.

But at the same time, Joseph was thinking.

(The reinforcements deployed by the capital will definitely pass through that military installation. Xavier-sama surely wants to regroup with them there and set out himself again.)

Considering Xavier’s position as the successor of the March of Guzzle, it wasn’t a fantasy that he himself would lead the reinforcements as well, depending on the status of the commander of the reinforcements.

Most likely, Xavier hadn’t given up yet on getting himself a clear achievement in this battle.

His action seemed a bit dangerous to the experienced knight Joseph, but likewise, it could be said that his struggle for fame and military recognition was proof that he perfectly understood what his father or subjects expected from him.

“The wounded worry me. I want to hurry as fast as their condition allows it. Joseph, would it be a problem when we let the soldiers that can’t walk anymore, ride behind us on our raptorial dragons?”

Joseph felt the strong impulse to support the youngster again as the green commandant tried to get the best outcome for the mission entrusted to him with all his might.

“Should be alright. Strictly speaking, it would be against the military law to let a foot soldier ride a raptorial dragon, but right now, we are still more or less in action. And it’s a tacit agreement that adaptive decisions on the battlefield are above the military law.”

Knight Joseph nodded slightly and approved of Xavier’s idea by saying that.

The “Raptorial Dragon”, ridden by knights such as Xavier or Joseph, had an even bigger physique than the horse commonly known as Heavy Breton, and roughly twice its strength.

In terms of resilience, it could carry two fully armoured people for a long period without any problems. Even three people were possible with periodical breaks and feeding without making it run.

“Good. Then we’ll go across the ‘Salt Road’ as fast as the condition of the wounded allows us to. We need to revise the schedules for breaks, drawing water and night watches. Now that I’ve failed my mission, I’ve the obligation to report it and request reinforcements as soon as possible.”

Xavier declared while he stared into the distance of the “Salt Road”, which was bathed in the red sunlight of the setting sun.

“Very well.”

It kind of sounded like the youthful commandant was trying to hide his weakness, whereat Knight Joseph shortly responded with a faithful voice.

Chapter 04: Zenjirou's Daily Life

In the Capital.

On a certain day, Zenjirou was already working since the early morning on a rare occasion. He met with numerous nobles in the royal palace and was pressed for etiquette.

He sat collected on the chair for the Prince Consort next to the throne while dressed up nobles came to in front of him one after another, bowing their heads.

"I am Thomas, the current head and Baron of the Pantoja Family.

This year again, my humble self will be at your service together with my wife in the mansion of the Pantoja Family in the Capital. I retain my enduring loyalty to the Kingdom and the Royal Family unchanged."

"Very well. Baron Pantoja, your loyalty is appreciated. As her proxy, I promise you to pass on your words to Her Highness Aura."

When Zenjirou said that and nodded, the middle-aged man in front of him— Baron Thomas Pantoja deeply lowered his head once more, then slowly stepped back.

In exchange, an old man, who had waited in the back of the room, came forward to Zenjirou.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Zenjirou-sama. My name is Brass, the previous head and knight of the Bobone Family. The family has detached my old self to serve in the Capital this year again. I shall fulfil any duty to the utmost of my abilities when either of you two Highnesses commands it."

"Okay, Sir Brass. I will let Her Highness Aura know about your unchanged loyalty."

The old man bowed deeply again and retreated as well.

Next up, a young knight stepped forward.

"I am Francesc, the oldest son of the Caballero Family's current head: Knight Conrad. Just like last year, the responsibility for serving in the Capital falls upon myself…"

Everyone was practically saying the same.

In short, they declared that they would be serving in the Capital as the representative of their family and Zenjirou acknowledged it.

A formal exchange, so to speak.

With an exceptionally powerful Royal Family, the Carpa Kingdom, a feudal state, had the unwritten rule that one person of the feudal families from each domain, either the previous, current or future head of the family, permanently stayed in the Capital.

The custom had originally started from the connotation of a "hostage" to the royal family, but nowadays, there were many merits for both the royal family and the feudal lords, so it was continued without any ill will in particular.

Like previously mentioned, the royal authority in the Carpa Kingdom was extremely distinctive. Due to that, it was quite beneficial for the nobles, too, to have someone from the family with a high decision-making power, remain in the capital.

The gathering of these influential nobles in the capital stimulated its economy greatly. And the richer the economy, the more common people congregated in the capital from the countryside.

Many rights and interests emerged in the capital when its population increased and the economic power improved. And the noblemen didn't want to leave the capital in order to obtain these rights and interests or not to lose them.

Each noble family had its own ulterior motives when they detached a representative of their families to the capital. Once every year, that person then announced its delegation to the Queen and got permission to stay in the capital.

Normally Queen Aura was supposed to carry out this formality, but all of those, who were scheduled to "announce their stay" today, were the same delegates from last year, so Zenjirou assumed that duty in her stead, since she was busy.

(The usual substitutions involve all kind of troublesome formalities and regulations, but otherwise it's just simple greetings. Better let me handle these things than to bother Aura with it.)

Sitting on his chair, Zenjirou received the greeting from one noble after another with a serious expression while such thoughts crossed his mind.

Right now, Aura ought to have a difficult conference with the emissary from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell in a different room of the royal palace.

Zenjirou was taking action and substituting for her like this because he wanted to ease her burden even just a bit.

Of course he wasn't making an unaccompanied appearance at important events, which could be interpreted as a "shift of power" from the Queen to the Prince Consort, neither was he taking care of matters that required complicated decisions.

The events he assumed in her stead were only ones like this, where even a speaking plush toy would suffice as long as it had a "royal" title.

It were hardly worthwhile jobs, but doing them "helped" Aura, which was more than enough for him.

However, there was no way that the noblemen of this world were able to comprehend that sentiment of his. Thus, some of them used occasions like his one to approach him in various ways.

The middle-aged nobleman that had just kneeled in front of Zenjirou, was of that kind.

"My name is Diego, the current head and Baron of the Duran Family. My humble self will continue to serve in the Capital for my family again this year. Still, I have got to say, it sure is hot in the capital. My domain is higher above the sea level than the capital, so I am not yet used to the heat here. The countryside has nothing to offer when faced with the capital, but you cannot help but miss it during this season."

Zenjirou's look turn a little bit wary when the middle-aged noble continued the unnecessary chit-chat.

But the nobleman didn't notice the petty change in him and rattled on.

"There is hardly anything interesting in the countryside, but the beautiful landscape and clean air are something to brag about. It would be an extraordinaire honour if you ever were to retreat there for the summer, Zenjirou-sama. My family would give you the warmest welcome."

Upon his words, Zenjirou tensed up his expression and narrowed his eyes to slits a bit.

It sounded like a simple invitation to a summer resort, but that wasn't the only meaning behind it.

At the present time, Aura and Zenjirou were the only royalty in the Carpa Kingdom, not including their baby Carlos Zenkichi. If Zenjirou, as one of the two royalty, left the capital for a "summer resort", then Aura, as the Queen, would naturally have to remain in the capital, since it was the hub for politics.

In other words, this middle-aged noble wanted to invite only Zenjirou himself to his domain, without being accompanied by Aura.

(Aw, I guess he also thinks that I'm discontent with my current standing?)

While getting a bit fed up inwardly, Zenjirou assessed the thoughts of the man kneeling in front of him.

In consideration of the patriarchal values in this country, his position could certainly only be seen as insufficient.

The pride of the average aristocratic male in the Carpa Kingdom would definitely not allow it that the wife took the reigns and he himself stood on the sidelines.

(Well, be it out of good-will or out of ill-will, there'll never be an end to people, who suggest things like this. But it's annoying how I can't just ignore them.)

Only sighing inwardly, Zenjirou raised an affected laughter and replied.

“Oho, that sounds appealing. I certainly would like to pay a visit with my wife when Zenkichi has come of age. I will count on you when the time comes.”

These playfulish words probably translated to something like this: “I’ve not the slightest intention to separate from Aura right now.”

“H- Hmm, that will not be any time soon. Very well, I will gladly entertain you on that occasion then.”

The true meaning must have been conveyed to him.

The middle-aged nobleman looked at Zenjirou with disappointment and lowered his head deeply.

“Good. I will keep it in mind.”

Zenjirou answered, pretending not to have noticed the change in the noble of middle age at all.

* * *

The work in the royal palace lasted as long as the sun was out in order to regain a bit of the time that was lost during the nearly three hour break at noon during the hot season.

Due to that, it had gotten so dark that Zenjirou walked with unsteady steps by the time he returned to the inner palace.

Guided by a waiting maid with a metal lantern for light, he made it back to the living room in the inner palace, where he curtly thanked the maid and opened the door by himself.

“…Fuh.”

The first thing he did in the already dim living room was to switch on the LED floor lamps.

Their white light was a bit dazzling, as his eyes had been used to the darkness.

Zenjirou slowly took of his clothes in the now illuminated living room.

A thick double-bogey trousers. A tunic that was overlapping at the front like Japanese clothes. And a red vest worn over it.

All of them were made out of fabrics with a high air permeability, as it was customary for a southern country, but the formal dress was still hot, since it was a tight fit.

He had thrown them off in no time and stood there only in his T-shirt and trunks. For a moment, he looked at the freezer of the five-door refrigerator standing near the wall, but he shook off the temptation by shaking his head after a moment of consideration.

“I can’t. The ice won’t be enough for the night when I take it out now.”

At least until Aura came back, he ought to endure without the cold breeze from the ice fan.

Instead, he took out the silver jug from the refrigerator and poured its contents into a glass, emptying it in one gulp.

“Fuh…”

His whole body started to sweat, pretty much like immediately oozing out the fluid he had just taken in.

“Ah, maybe I should get into the bath without waiting for Aura?”

Tempted like that, he unconsciously directed his gaze at the shelf with the bathing goods and then remembered something.

“…Reminds me, my soap making isn’t really going well.”

A few days ago, he had started to try his hand at making soap from lye and vegetable oil, but his effort was hardly paying off for now.

The result of the first day had just been “oil mixed with ash” and the mixture got relatively better later on, but only a few trails were worth to be called “saponification”.

Did the problem lie with the lye? Or the oil? Or maybe his performance? He just didn't know. For the time being, it definitely meant a lot of trial-and-error.

"Perhaps I ought to start with making caustic soda? Nah, making caustic soda from natural ingredients definitely sounds more difficult than making soap without it."

There was no end to his troubles.

In the modern age, handmade soap was typically made by letting vegetable oil react with a sodium hydroxide solution (caustic soda).

Leaching ashes was a way older technique. The making of soap became so much easier by using caustic soda when available.

Technically, there was a guide on how to make caustic soda on his computer, too, but needless to say, he hadn't actually tried that yet.

Zenjirou knew of two methods to make caustic soda.

The first one was to electrolyze salt water, but that required an "ion exchange membrane", which was impossible to obtain here, so he could only give up on that method.

Therefore, he was considering the second one right now.

That method involved the metathesis reaction between "calcium hydroxide" and "sodium carbonate" (a reaction between two compounds to make two different compounds), which altered them into "sodium hydroxide" (caustic soda) and "calcium carbonate".

So it required "calcium hydroxide" and "sodium carbonate" at the beginning.

The calcium hydroxide was also called "slake lime". It could be created by letting water react with "quick lime", which was gained from burning shells.

As for the other compound: The sodium carbonate could be obtained by heating up sodium bicarbonate aka "baking soda".

In other words, it was theoretically possible to create "caustic soda" as long as you had "natural baking soda" and "shells".

Speaking of "shells" and "natural baking soda", these two happened to be relevant to the glass manufacture as well, so Aura already held a certain amount of them available in the royal palace for it.

The raw materials were already gathered in the royal palace. In that sense, it was understandable that Zenjirou was itching to try his hand at making "caustic soda".

However, making "caustic soda" from "shells" and "natural baking soda" naturally involved various working steps.

It shouldn't be easy to accomplish for a complete amateur like Zenjirou without the instructions of an expert.

Even when thinking positive, he ought to be prepared that it took a couple of months to clear each step.

And even if he were to clear all steps and succeed in making "caustic soda", the "caustic soda" was a hazardous substance that could steal your eyesight when even just a bit got into your eyes.

Moreover, the substance was difficult to handle because it could change by reacting with the carbon dioxide in the air or liquefy through absorbing water vapour.

Thinking about it carefully, it was more realistic to make the soap through leaching ashes right now instead of creating "caustic soda" for it first.

"Okay, I'll continue with the current method for a bit longer. Its more or less emulsifying now anyway. Guess I'll make a diagram with the lye and oil percentage on the x- and y-axe, respectively, and track its tendency."

Bringing his brain gear into action, Zenjirou faced the computer and switched it on, opening the spreadsheet software right away.

“First I’ve to prepare various types of ashes to make lye. A couple of different vegetable oils are a must, too. Maybe I even ought to blend them? No, I’ve to gauge the general tendency first. I feel a bit bad about it, but the maids will have to help out.”

In the end, he sat in front of his computer like that and immersed himself in drawing up a plan for the future course of action until Aura came back.

* * *

Night-time after the sun had set.

The married couple, Zenjirou and Queen Aura, sat on the black couches in the living room of the inner palace like always and was talking.

“Ehm, then it’s pretty much set in stone that the Prince and Princess of the Twin Kingdom will pay us a visit?”

Wearing a rough outfit consisting of a white T-Shirt and light-blue hemp-trousers, Zenjirou leaned a bit forward on the black leather couch and confirmed that with his wife sitting across of him.

Aura, clad in a thin casual wear in red, nodded to his question while retaining the wrinkle between her eyebrows.

“Yes. It is still at the informal stage, but I would say it is as good as settled. I tried to press ahead without disclosing much information, but… I guess that effort will turn out to be in vain. Soon enough, a commotion will hit the western part of the South Continent. Needless to say the epicenter will be our royal palace. Forgive me, but you better prepare yourself as well.”

His wife talked about the upcoming trouble in a matter-of-fact tone, whereat Zenjirou made no pretence of his annoyance and sighed.

“…Okay. Anyway, why do you say the non-disclosure will be in vain? We want to hide it, but they don’t?”

In reaction to his question, Aura re-crossed her legs on top of the couch while shaking her head.

“No. A foreign visit from the Sharrow Family is a serious affair for the Twin Kingdom as well. They would never leak the information on purpose. However, it is not so easy for us, because we will accommodate foreign royalty in our palace for a long period of time. I have to assign a special budget and people for the preparation. Besides, I have to meet with their representative again to ask for some compensation from the Twin Kingdom so that we do not operate in the red for the special budget and staff costs, since we are only accepting a request from their side. With so much people, goods and money involved, keen people will notice the truth, no matter how careful we are.”

“I see.”

Zenjirou was convinced by that. Even if they kept the matter itself a secret, it was nearly impossible to hide the flow of money or goods from the eyes of nobility.

The amount of money and goods necessary to house two royalty for a long time was not an insignificant number and a keen person would notice its abnormal flow right away.

Even if he was frowning, her husband was still somewhat treating it as someone else’s problem, so the Queen said with a cautionary tone.

“I fear that once the information starts to go around, you will be the one targeted for facts, Zenjirou. It should get rather bothersome around you.”

“Ugh…”

Zenjirou finally assumed a serious expression upon these words.

He must have imagined how the nobles would come probing for the truth of the matter with all kind of means.

“Hah…”

A long sigh escaped his mouth.

Anyway, it would be a shame to spend their time alone with just a gloomy topic.

Collecting herself, Aura took ice and fruit juice from the refrigerator and changed the topic while pouring the juice in her red glass and into Zenjirou's blue glass.

"Reminds me, you have the day off tomorrow for a change, right? Do you have any plans?"

Zenjirou answered her question while accepting the offered blue glass from her.

"Th- Thanks. Yeah, since I'll have the time, I want to try out my soap. Some of the soap I made yesterday turned out really good, so I want to test it for pleasantness with the help of the maids."

His recent efforts to make soap from lye and vegetable oil were going relatively well. Of course it was still a long way off until an efficient fabrication method, but he managed to get something close to a finished product by pure chance.

But even that "finished product" would never be finished in its actual meaning as long as he didn't test it for comfortableness.

Therefore the waiting maids would literally "lend a hand".

Zenjirou was a bit reluctant to actually use it on the delicate skin of women, but there was nothing he could do about it by himself.

After all, each person had a different constitution, which in turn could even change for the same person, depending on the current physical condition or season.

Unless a lot of people tried it out, he couldn't guarantee its safe application.

"Oh right, the bathing goods you brought along from your world are limited after all."

Ever since she had married Zenjirou, Aura was always using the body soap, facial soap, shampoo and rinse from Japan. She nodded convinced.

"Yeah. Truth be told, the soap has the least danger to run out. But even though the shampoo will run out first, it's too difficult to make."

Although it does get rid of the dirt when you wash your hair with body soap, it will make the hair rough, hurting it instead.

In the future, Zenjirou wanted to search for a method to clean the hair without harming its brilliance in order to replace the perfumed oil, which was typically used in the higher society of the Carpa Kingdom, but that was even further down the road than the completion of the soap.

To be honest, there was no hope to achieve it before the stock of shampoo was used up.

It must have been his ruin that the majority of his mind was occupied by these thoughts.

Zenjirou tried to lift his blue Kiriko glass from the table like always, but it slipped through his fingers.

"Aw!?"

It was already too late by the time he exclaimed.

The glass dropped back onto the wooden table and shattered with a clanging sound.

The blue flinders in all sizes and the melting ice scattered over the well-polished table, whereas the fruit juice dripped from the table down onto the carpet.

Talk about bad luck! If he had dropped it over the long-stranded carpet or cushioned couch, then there would have been a chance that it didn't break, but it fell down onto the hard table of all places.

"Argh, now I've done it!"

Zenjirou unwittingly clicked his tongue.

It was a rather harsh setback to him. On Earth, he could just buy the glass anew, but in this world it was an irreplaceable item he would never get his hands on again.

Even now, he still hadn't really warmed up to the taste of the silver or wooden cups, so the glass had been an important article to him without a doubt.

Nevertheless, he had no one else to blame but himself for breaking it out of carelessness.

"Well, no use crying over spilt milk. I'm afraid I'll have the maid clean it up."

Saying that, Zenjirou reached out for the bell on the table. At that moment.

"Hmm… considering my schedule… Yes, no problem."

Aura was half-rising from the opposite couch and mumbling to herself on the quiet, then stopped Zenjirou.

"Wait, Zenjirou. You do not have to do that. This is a good occasion. As a legit member of the Carpa Royal Family, you have a right to know about it."

"Aura?"

As his wife was suddenly making a big deal out of a single broken glass, Zenjirou paused his hand reaching out for the bell and inclined his head doubtfully.

Whether she noticed her husband's scruple or not, Aura stood up straight and went towards the scattered glass flinders on top of the table, holding out the palm of her right hand with its five fingers spread.

"The skill I am about to show you is the 'hidden magic' of the Carpa Family. Once you mastered magic, I will teach it you as well, but you cannot let others know about the existence of this magic at all cost. Never ever use it in front of people. That naturally includes leading personalities in our country like General Puyol or Marquis Guzzle, but it also applies to my loyal retainers such as Fabio and Espaldion. Neither are you allowed to show this magic to Carlos until I say so. Understood?"

With the palm of her hand still directed at the broken glass, she firmly looked Zenjirou, who was looking up to her from the couch, in the eyes and said with a strict tone.

"Yeah."

From her tone, Zenjirou realized that it was no time to joke around, so he obediently consented.

"Good."

Aura nodded short as the reaction of her husband was to her satisfaction, and vitalized the light of magical power slowly rising from her entire body, chanting a spell.

'Rewind the time of the target for a day. As compensation, I make one-thousand and three-hundred offerings of magical power to the space-time spirit.'

It had a dramatic effect.

The broken glass on the table was enveloped by a hemisphere of light and in the next moment, the hemisphere emitted a light too bright to look into.

"Uwah!? …Eh!?"

Zenjirou squinted his eyes shut reflexively. When he opened his eyes again, the blue Satsuma Kiriko glass stood on top of the table in its recovered original form.

With his eyes widened in surprise, he muttered to himself.

"Wow…! Restoration Magic… No, not quite?"

Just looking at the result made it seem like a magic to repair things, but taking Aura's earlier chant into consideration, it obviously was something different.

Aura, still standing, nodded upon his words.

"Indeed. The nature of the 'bloodline magic' from the Carpa Family is far too different for that. It is the hidden magic of my family: 'Time Reversal'."

"'Time Reversal'…"

Zenjirou was overwhelmed by the phenomenon that had occurred in front of his eyes, and he muttered that.

The bloodline magic of the Carpa Royal Family was “Space-Time Magic”. When he had heard that it controlled space and time, he had somewhat considered the possibility of manipulating time, but witnessing that phenomenon with his own eyes like this aroused an inexpressible excitement in him.

Might as well call it “fascination”.

Even at the time Lady Octavia had shown him the “water sphere” spell, he hadn’t been this fascinated.

An excitement equivalent to a fifth of the arousal from burying his face into Aura’s breasts during their bridal night, took a hold of his heart right now.

Aura must have noticed the change in her husband.

Sitting back onto the couch, she showed a wry smile and continued the explanation.

“I am sorry to spoil your fun, but this magic is actually not as impressive as it looks.”

“What do you mean?”

Zenjirou averted his gaze from the repaired glass and looked at Aura sitting across of him again as he asked back.

She casually shrugged her shoulders, which were bared in her sleeveless gown.

“First off, ‘Time Reversal’ can only be applied to ‘things without magical power’, so it is almost impossible to use it on living beings. The only exceptions are lower life forms without magical power such as insects or small fishes.

Magic tools are out of the question as well. So that only leaves things that are not living beings, nor magic tools. Amongst these, very few are actually of value.

‘Time Reversal’ consumes an enormous amount of magical power, so surprisingly few objects legitimize the application by a direct descendant of the royal family.”

Aura smiled after saying that.

It was clearly evident that “something, neither a living being, nor a magic tool” with a value high enough that it warranted a repair through the hidden magic of the royal family, would not be all that common, considering the values of this world.

As a matter of fact, Aura herself had not many memories of having used “Time Reversal” usefully.

If she had to name the most useful application, it would be how she secretly repaired the pipe of her father, the previous king, when she had broken it by accident. It was hardly anything important.

“Besides, the required magical power increases exponential with the size of the target or the rewind time. I need to be prepared to use up all of my magical power to rewind a month-worth of time. For a year-worth of time, I would even have to add the magical power of my future self as a ‘future compensation’ or the magic would not activate. It is extremely unprofitable. However, if the world ever gets to know about this magic by chance, it is quite unlikely that its strict restrictions would be propagated. In the end, they would falsely believe that it is an almighty magic that can even resurrect the dead. Therefore, the existence of this magic has to remain an absolute secret. Do you understand that, Zenjirou?”

Aura eloquently outlined the impracticality of ‘Time Reversal’, but it did no harm to the excitement in Zenjirou’s eyes.

With the glint of exaltation remaining in his eyes, he looked Aura, sitting across of him, into the eyes and asked with a slightly shaking voice.

“In other words, it IS possible to rewind time for a ‘short period’ when the object has ‘no magical power’ and ‘isn’t too big’?”

“W- Well, yeah.”

Aura backed off a bit as she was overwhelmed by her husband’s vigour on a rare occasion, but still nodded.

In his thrilled state, Zenjirou didn’t notice his wife’s strange behaviour and showed a bright smile. Then he rushed into the corner of the room.

“W- Well then, how much of a burden would it be on you to rewind time on this one as short as possible?”

Saying so, he pointed at an electronic appliances: The “air conditioning” that hadn’t been put to use since he brought it over from Japan.

Right after coming here, he had given up on assembling it, so it was still wrapped in its plastic packing.

Aura inclined her head puzzled as she still didn’t know what Zenjirou was getting at, but answered his question truthfully nevertheless.

“Mhm… It is so much bigger than the glass, so I cannot rewind it as simple as I did just now. But, well, the minimum rewind time is one day, so if it is just that, it would not be an impossible task.

When I save my magical power for one day and have nothing scheduled for the next day, then it is feasible by night of said day.”

The truth of the matter was that Aura didn’t exhaust her magical power all that often.

However, as the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom, she was the only person that could use the “Teleport” magic, which was a trump card for emergencies.

So it was expected that she preserved her magical power in order to be able to use that trump card at any moment.

Her answer was attached to conditions, but it seemed to satisfy Zenjirou regardless.

Showing a bright smile, he tightly clenched his fists and fist pumped in a rapid series to express his euphoria.

“Yes, yes, yes! I can finally start to assemble the ‘air conditioning’!”

His sentence was accompanied by a gush of emotions.

The reason he didn’t assemble the air conditioning until now was that he feared he would “make a mistake and break it beyond repair”.

However, a broken air condition was no longer “beyond repair” with the “Time Reversal” magic.

Hence, he could jump at the assembling without worries.

Even when he didn’t succeed on the first try, he had as much attempts as necessary. There was nothing to be afraid of, knowing this.

“Hey, Aura. I’ve a little request…”

Saying so, Zenjirou drew closer to her with the same smile as a “man begging his wife for some urgent spending money”.

Chapter 05: A formidable Opponent at Noon, a Lesson in the Evening and Comfort at Night.

Zenjirou was making it a rule for himself to only attend events that were held for the sake of form as far as practicable, but appearing in public brought about some entanglements that he just couldn't escape.

On a certain day, his appearance at a luncheon meeting that was held in form of a buffet in one part of the royal palace, was inevitably.

"Oh my, then you made a completely new alcohol drink by yourself, Zenjirou-sama? How wonderful."

Standing in front of him, a tall beauty, who could pass as a super model, praised him with such an affected voice while her arms were crossed in front of her chest. It was Fatima Guillén.

"No, it's just a hobby of mine. It's hardly praiseworthy."

Zenjirou tried to somehow end the conversation with an behaviour as cold as the circumstances permitted it, but she wasn't the little sister of the "Insatiable Wolf" aka General Puyol for nothing. Her assertiveness and pushiness were in no way inferior to her brother's.

"Oh my, how modest. They say alcohol is a kind of culture. Creating a completely new alcohol drink means to enrich our country's culture and economy. It is wonderful, indeed."

She held him in place with a nauseating flattery.

"Haha, please stop flattering me. When a beautiful woman like you sweet-talks me, I'll likely get all stuck-up."

Saying nothing but empty phrases, Zenjirou protected himself with a forced smile while he inwardly broke out a cold sweat and thought "what a pain".

As the banquet was no formal event, it didn't place as much importance on the social standing and etiquette. Since he only had a superficial knowledge about the etiquette, it had the merit that mistakes from him were somewhat overlooked, but on the other hand, it also had the demerit of allowing aggressive approaches like this one.

At any rate, it had been a mistake that he attended this banquet.

Zenjirou regretted his decision all too late.

From the list of participants that he viewed before, he had concluded that there would be no ambitious person amongst the guests, who would assertively curry favour with him, so he had attended unmindful, but this situation without an ambitious person turned against him now.

As a result, Famita Guillén, the little sister of an ambitious person, had participated at the last minute and could monopolize the approach on him to her heart's content.

(Well, I'm surprised she can throw herself at a man she doesn't love with such vigour. Guess I just can't emphasize with the values of nobles.)

Zenjirou looked at the tall beauty, who was half a head taller than him and continued to chat passionately in front of him, while he was under such an impression.

This may come across harsh, but the woman called Fatima was by far the most awkward person in keeping a poker face amongst all the people Zenjirou had met so far.

Well, considering that she was only seventeen years-old, it was to be expected, but it was obvious even to him that she hadn't had her facial expression under control.

Her almond black eyes, emitting a strong will, were a problem in particular. No matter how much she praised him with words or how she gave him a charming smile, the glint in her eyes was the same as a "beast targeting its prey".

Everything she did, including attracting his affection, happened on the orders of her brother. Her desire was the prosperity of the Guillén Family and she saw no value in making a happy family with him.

At least it appeared as such to Zenjirou.

However beautiful she may be, it would be no laughing matter to take her as a concubine. Zenjirou realized that it was a bit childish to think that about a girl seven years younger than him, but he couldn't help but feel that way instinctively.

As the girl sensed his inner turmoil, Fatima overhasty exaggerated her offence, whereat Zenjirou was even further repelled.

It was an insuperable vicious circle.

"I am not much of a drinker myself, but over the generation, the Guillén Family had a lot of sympathizer for alcohol. I could tell a thousand tales about my brother, the current head of the family, in regards to alcohol."

"Oho. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but General Puyol sure is an exception. All the tales about him truly describe him as the great man that he looks like."

Zenjirou had feared that he went overboard with his affected reaction, but his seemingly admiring comment brightened up Fatima's expression.

"Yes! When my brother was eighteen years old, he drunk our uncle Emidio-dono, known as a heavy drinker, under the table in a contest. My uncle lost his treasured spear to my brother as the stake, which made his loss only worse. Since then my uncle has never touched alcohol again, so his wife, Lady Deborah, was quite grateful to my brother."

As usual, the girl kept talking about the brave anecdotes of her older brother.

Zenjirou didn't have an all that favourable impression of General Puyol, as he was Aura's former husband candidate, so it was far from pleasant to hear him getting praised to the skies like this.

(Interesting. If he holds his drink so well, I'll make some super high-proof alcohol next time, like 80% or so, and let him drink it in one go.)

Such mischievous thoughts were crossing his mind.

What a great feeling that would be if he could have the man, who walked about with a confident and overwhelming aura, on his knees for being dead-drunk.

Without an idea about the small-calibre imagination of the man in front of her, Fatima continued the bragging of her beloved brother with even more vigour.

"…Furthermore, a couple of his heroic deeds during the previous war have been made into songs. If you have the time, please invite a troubadour next time and listen to them. Any troubadour associated with the royal palace knows of them."

Even Zenjirou couldn't withhold his wry smile as the tall beauty proudly continued to brag about her sweet brother.

"You sure respect your brother General Puyol from the bottom of your heart, My Lady Fatima."

Upon the kind of warm-hearted words one gives to children, Fatima realized that she had completely wandered from one topic to another and flushed her cheeks reddish all too late.

"Ah, f- forgive me. Here I go on all by myself…"

She lowered her head embarrassed with these words and her coquettish played smile made her look numerous times more lovely. Still, she was hardly as radiant as when she was talking about the heroic deeds of her beloved brother, which grated a bit on Zenjirou's nerves.

"No need to apologize. General Puyol is a very prominent figure in the military. It's revealing to hear about his deeds and I personally am quite interested in it as well."

"Many thanks, Zenjirou-sama."

When he smoothed the situation out, the tall beauty leaned over her tall body and lowered her head bashfully.

* * *

The extremely tiring luncheon meeting somehow came to an end and Zenjirou had returned into the inner palace, but unfortunately it was not time to relax just yet.

“Octavia-sama is awaiting you, Zenjirou-sama.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Today’s afternoon was scheduled with a magic lesson from Lady Octavia.

Over past year, Zenjirou and Lady Octavia had settled into the “classroom”.

Like always, they sat across each other on chairs with a table in-between them, carrying out the mysterious lesson.

“Well then, Zenjirou-sama, please go ahead. Show me your magic.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Obeying his “teacher”, Zenjirou took a deep breath while remaining seated comfortably in the chair.

Since he had awakened the “ability to detect magical power” by now, he was able to perceive the faint magical glow coming from his body.

Zenjirou vividly pictured the effect of the magic inside his head while registering that glow coming from his folded hands on the table in the corner of the eye, then he spoke the “incantation”.

‘Cut off a spherical space of the world around the tip of my finger. As compensation, I will make three-hundred and fifty-nine offerings of magical power to the Space-Time spirit.’

He was speaking in the Magic Language. That language could cram various meanings into a single syllable, so the automatic translation from the Soul of Words made it sound like a rather long sentence, even though only a few words were spoken.

A moment later, the spell activated correctly.

A transparent light dome, centred around Zenjirou— or to be more precise, around the upheld index finger of his right hand, took shape.

It was a kind of Space-Time Magic, the bloodline magic of the Carpa Royal Family: “Space Isolation Barrier”.

It was a powerful defence magic that isolated space itself and prevented all interference from the outside, but it didn’t last for more than thirty seconds, so there weren’t many practical usages for it.

“Great.”

Anyway, Zenjirou unintentionally leaked a joyful utterance as he succeeded in activating the magic.

“Well done, Zenjirou-sama. You can use ‘Space Isolation Barrier’ almost perfectly already.”

“Guess so. In terms of magical output, this magic is the most simple for me after all.”

Since he wasn’t used to such straightforward praise, he reflexively conducted himself humbly, even while the corners of his mouth twitched happily.

The magic of this world was easier to activate when the output of the magic was closer to the naturally discharged magical power of the spell caster. Zenjirou actually couldn’t yet use the essential ability for a magician: The “control over magical output”.

But while he said so with a shrug of his shoulders, his composed female teacher showed a faint smile and spoke in a rare playful tone.

“Not quite, Zenjirou-sama. You are already beginning to get the hang of the ‘control over magical output’. Have you not noticed it? The naturally discharged magical power of a person is not identical on every day. It fluctuates subtle based on your physical condition and mental state of the day. Your magical output for today is a little bit higher than the required output for the ‘Space Isolation Barrier’.”

Zenjirou was at a loss for words for a moment upon the unexpected statement.

“…Then why did the magic activate?”

Lady Octavia, likewise his teacher for etiquette and culture, was inwardly delighted that Zenjirou kept his way of speaking befitting for a royalty despite his perplexity, and explained in a calm manner.

“For the very reason I just told you. Although it was just for a little bit, you unconsciously regulated your magical power and restricted the output. How about we try it again? This time pay close attention to the magical glow coming from your body.”

The “Space Isolation Barrier” had a short duration, so it had already dissipated.

“Mhm…”

Still somewhat doubtful, Zenjirou obeyed his teacher nevertheless and used the earlier magic again.

‘Cut off a spherical space of the world around the tip of my finger. As compensation, I will make three-hundred and fifty-nine offerings of magical power to the Space-Time spirit.’

However, he now focussed on the change in the magical power coming from his body.

By doing so, he clearly saw that the magical glow emitted from his folded hands on the table became fainter. In the next moment, the magic activated without problems and the dome of light appeared in the air.

“Aha… Looks like I’m really regulating my magical power.”

“Indeed. It is not much yet, but once you come to grips with it, you will be able to control your magical output at will. That is the second step for a magician. After you awakened your ability to detect magical power and learned how to control your magical output, the only thing you have to do is to memorize the individual spells. You are now at the second most important turning point, Zenjirou-sama.”

“Okay. Keep on instructing me.”

When he uttered the words in a commanding tone from a superior, which he finally could use now without feeling awkward, Lady Octavia respectfully lowered her head.

“As you wish. I may be inexperienced, but it is my greatest joy to be able to serve you.”

Her conduct was so perfect that it didn’t offend a single etiquette and her polite way of speaking sounded like sincere courtesy. A too well-mannered behaviour could make one feel like being treated as a stranger, but in Lady Octavia’s case, it was a natural virtue.

The young noble woman emitted a warm-hearted kindness just by smiling sweetly.

“Then let us begin with the training for the control over magical power from today on. It is done like this… Can you see it? By doing this, you can restrict or increase the output of magical power.”

In line with her words, the magical glow from her entire body brightened and weakened through perfect command of her will.

“Please try it now, Zenjirou-sama.”

“O- Okay… M- Mhmm…!”

Zenjirou somewhat tried to change his magical output with the expierence from the earlier cast magic, but his efforts hardly bore fruit.

It wasn’t entirely in vain, but the shift merely came down to a level of “now that you mention it, the glow gets a little stronger and weaker, maybe?” when one strained his eyes.

It would simply be pretentious to compare it with Lady Octavia’s attempt, as she was in perfect control of it.

However, the youthful teacher praised the struggle of her student.

“Yes, just like that. To stick with the analogy, where the acquiring of the ability to detect magical power can be described as ‘opening one’s eyes’, the comprehension of controlling the magical output can be described as ‘learning another way to move one’s body’. In other words, the control over magical output only begins after you awaken to it, unlike the ability to detect magic, which you obtain by awakening it just once. You are going to move a body that has never moved before. You are like a newborn child, if you will so. In the same manner a baby learns to turn in his sleep, then to crawl and finally to pull himself up, you take your time to learn how to move your second body, namely your ‘magical power’.”

There were no shortcuts to this progress. Only an accumulation of honest effort. Furthermore, it required talent to get past a certain level, just as moving your body.

No matter how much an untalented person trained for it, he would only be able to restrict and increase his magical output to a certain point or else fail at a delicate control of it.

“Grr…!”

To sum it up: There was a relative high chance that this training would turn out to be a “fruitless effort”. Nevertheless, not one fibre of Zenjirou’s body currently considered the choice “to give up” despite knowing this.

(I won’t be able to use ‘Teleport’, unless I get a hang of this control over magical output.)

If Zenjirou failed to learn how to use “Teleport” by the time Aura gave birth again, he would once again have to undergo the painful experience of simply praying to God.

“Mgh… Grr…”

(Do it! For Aura!)

Zenjirou kept going with the training for “control over magical output” in good earnest without noticing the heart-warming gaze Lady Octavia gave him as she watched over him.

* * *

During the hottest season, Zenjirou had spent a relatively busy half-day with a luncheon meeting at noon and a magic lesson in the afternoon. By the time Aura came back, he was laying on the black couch in just a T-Shirt and trousers, watching a DVD.

“I am back, Zenjirou.”

Zenjirou reflexively took the remote control and paused the DVD. Then he got up from the couch and looked into the direction of the voice, where he found his beloved wife in a rare dress.

“Oh, welcome back, Aura. What’s up with these clothes? In the morning you were still wearing your usual dress, weren’t you?”

When he had seen her off in the morning, she had been wearing the usual red evening dress with a deep V-cleavage, but for some reason she was now clad in the sari-like national attire, the one Lady Octavia normally wore.

But unlike Lady Octavia, who liked to arrange her attire around the colour blue, Aura’s sari had a vivid red colour as the base.

Aura raised the corners of her mouth to a little smile, as the reaction of her husband pleased her.

“Fufu, surprised? I changed because I attended a traditional event in the afternoon today. Our country technically acknowledges dresses as a formal attire as well, but a few old events require me to wear traditional clothes like this.”

Spreading both her arms and throwing out her chest, Aura showed off her unusual wardrobe to her husband.

The look in her eyes and her behaviour were basically screaming the question “does it suit me?” and Zenjirou was not so dim-witted to overlook it.

Still, he wasn’t an eloquent person, so all he could say was his honest opinion without giving in to his embarrassment.

“Ui. It’s my first time seeing it, but it aren’t bad at all. Of course your usual dress is great, too, but this one’s quite vivid.”

Fortunately the awkward, but sincere praise of her husband seemed to have properly been conveyed to her.

“Good. I usually do not wear this kind of clothing, because it is harder to move in than the military uniform or dresses, but if you like them, I may put them on more often from now on.”

Her bright smile was so charming that it captured Zenjirou even now.

Zenjirou wasn't aware of it, but contrary to her bearing as a Queen, Aura had a surprisingly pure and cute attitude in regards to the subtleties between a man and a woman.

Normally she would take off the formal attire and exchange it for a more comfortable casual wear as soon as she returned to the room, but today she sat down next to Zenjirou on the couch while keeping the red sari on.

"….."

"Mm…"

When Zenjirou naturally put his right arm around her right shoulder, Aura went with the flow and rested her head on his shoulder.

Although the ventilator was blowing over a bucket of water, the nights of the hottest season were still hot, but sometimes they just wanted to embrace like this nevertheless.

"….."

"….."

That said, there was a limit to what their love power could overcome.

Maybe they had been satisfied with the physical contact already or maybe they couldn't endure the heat anymore.

Either way, they separated from each other at the same time.

"Reminds me, you were watching a DVD, right? Are you not going to finish it?"

Sitting up, Aura suddenly remembered what Zenjirou had been doing when she had entered the living room and asked that.

But Zenjirou shook his head.

"Nah, I was just killing time until you get back. I can always finish it in two days or so, when I've got time for myself again."

"Hmm, okay."

Aura realized that he was being considerate to her, but decided to obediently presume on his benevolence.

If it had been a game or music, she could have enjoyed it together with him, but watching a DVD was out of the question.

After all, the Soul of Words didn't work through machines. There were extremely few movies or series that were interesting without understanding the language. She had come to somewhat like sport broadcasts like soccer or baseball, since she learned most of the rules through video games, but she just couldn't get enthusiastic about it due to the lack of emotional attachment to the sport teams from Zenjirou's world.

Zenjirou regretted the fact that he could have brought along silent movies from Chaplin or something like that if he had known that beforehand.

Anyway, Aura asked her husband her habitual question as she had cut short the old topic.

"So, how was your day? Did anything special happen?"

"Mh? Well, the luncheon meeting was no big deal, I guess? Though I panicked a bit when Lady Fatima Guillén barged into it."

The obtrusion of Fatima Guillén. Aura's expression stiffened, when she heard the name of the girl, who was making the most aggressive moves at the present time.

"Fatima? She did not get any weird promises out of you, did she?"

"Don't worry. I brushed her off politely. Or rather, she lapsed into her brother complex midway and lost sight of everything else. Ah, but I told her about my 'distilled liquor'. Was that bad?"

Her husband asked with a slightly distressed expression, whereat the Queen pondered for a moment, then spoke.

“No… If that is all, it poses no problem. I had planned to serve the distilled liquor at the next banquet anyway.”

“Okay, good.”

Zenjirou made a sigh of relief, but Aura didn’t neglect to give him a warning.

“Nevertheless, be careful about what you disclose. Distilled liquor and soap are harmless, but I want the glass to be a royal secret even after we manage to reproduce it.”

Besides, if Zenjirou were to carelessly improve the country, the “Faction opposing the Queen” would take advantage of that and make him their puppet.

Even Zenjirou was aware of this danger.

“Yeah, sorry. I was kinda careless.”

These apologetic words were spoken with a meek face. He must have grown accustomed to things, in a bad way. His careless actions were a bit on the raise recently.

“…Okay, it was nothing grave this time, so just be more careful from now on. Did anything else happen?”

Zenjirou was grateful to the good will of his wife, as she was undertaking a slightly forceful topic change, and took her up on the offer.

“Let’s see, I made good progress in the magic lesson with Octavia-san. I can now activate the ‘Space Isolation Barrier’ nine out of ten times and I learned to control my magical output for a bit. See.”

Saying so, he intensified and weakened the glow of magical power coming from his body, albeit quite marginal.

“Ohh! You can already do that after such a short time. I am impressed. It took me more than two years to control the output of magical power through my own will even for a little bit after my grandfather started to teach me magic.”

She praised him like that.

But Zenjirou couldn’t help but smile wryly as he knew the actual story.

“That was when you were seven, right? Since I’m an adult, I’ve a better perceptivity and more patience than a child, so I’m obviously going to learn faster.”

It definitely would have been a bit sad if he, in his mid-twenties, only improved his magic as fast as the seven-year old Aura.

Zenjirou had a concrete goal. Namely to learn how to use “Teleport” until Aura was pregnant with their second child.

For that goal, he was prepared to give it his all.

“Rest assured, I’ll give my best.”

“Okay. But do not overdo it.”

Aura reminded Zenjirou, as he resolved himself anew, in a casual manner, but inwardly she was seriously worried.

(Good grief. If I leave him alone, he will push himself to the limit again for “self-practice”. My husband is always so quick to do everything in his power.)

For the time being, she once again would have to actively watch over him and incite him to rest sometimes.

(Jeez, he is more handful than a slothful person.)

Aura harboured such a reproachful impression, but the look she gave her husband from the side was overflowing with kindness.

Chapter 06: Matters Set in Motion

On a certain afternoon, roughly ten days after Xavier and his men fought on the Salt road.

Aura was performing her duties in her office like always and was reading the document that the "small flying dragon" had just delivered from the fortress on the edge of the royal domain, making a deep sigh.

"…Fuh. I see, the son of Marquis Guzzle failed the subjugation. Well, at least he brought back the concrete information about the cause of the road's disorder. That is an achievement in itself."

Thinking that it had turned out a little bit troublesome, she craned her neck while remaining seated on her chair. The sunlight coming in from the windows let her loose, red hair shine beautifully.

"Yes. It certainly is a bit too much for a hundred soldiers if their target was an coordinated pack of over fifty Pack Dragons, like the report said. I would say Xavier-dono made the right decision."

"I know that."

Aura kept her face facing forward while she replied to her secretary, standing at an angle behind her, with such short and blunt words.

She agreed with the opinion that Xavier had made the correct decision.

The Carpa Kingdom was still in the middle of replenishing the losses from the previous war. A young man in perfect health was an important asset, no matter if he was under her direct command or under some feudal lord.

The subjugation couldn't be called a success when they got rid of the "Pack Dragons", but lost half of the soldiers in doing so.

For that reason, the third son of Marquis Guzzle had made a rational and correct decision in spite of being a young commander on his first assignment.

At least Aura wasn't counting the "subjugation failure" against Xavier. However, due to her position, it was likewise a fact that she couldn't openly appreciate his decision.

"Now the 'Pack Dragon Subjugation' mission switched from the Guzzle Family to General Puyol."

Aura heaved a deep sigh.

One thousand elite royal soldiers lead by General Puyol were already on their way to the fortress under the pretext of "countryside training". It was even possible that they had arrived there already. Either way, the initiative of this mission had shifted to General Puyol.

As Aura couldn't leave the capital, she could only watch in silence how things developed.

"Well, whatever. We are talking about that man here. He will definitely resolve the matter in one way or another."

His personality aside, General Puyol could be trusted when it came down to his military abilities.

It was a bit unfortunate for the Guzzle boy, who wanted to raise his reputation as the next feudal lord through this case, but the re-establishment of the Salt Road was an urgent matter. It would be Marquis Guzzle first and foremost, when it came to compensating the resulting loss from a delayed solution, so they had to put up with it, even when their objective wasn't exactly met. However…

"It certainly is hard to imagine that General Puyol will fail. The problem is that he will try to use this achievement as a stepping stone to reach even further."

The slender face of Secretary Fabio kept an inexpressiveness that raised the question if he actually was wearing a well-made mask, while he said that in an unemotional tone.

"…Well, on the other hand, it might actually be a good thing. At least he will not be present in the capital when the Prince and Princess from the Twin Kingdom visit."

Aura's tone, as she said that, sounded kind of forced in order to comfort herself.

* * *

In the past, when Zenjirou had still been in elementary school, he had watched the talk corner of a music show.

There a certain musician had answered a question about his pre-debut time when he still had been poor: “What was the toughest part-time job you have experienced back then?”

And that musician replied at once: “It was assembling air conditioning units.”

For the simple reason that a room, where an air conditioning was to be assembled, naturally had no prior air conditioning. And since the room required air conditioning, it was accordingly hot.

An arduous work in a room without air conditioning and when you were finally done, you headed straight to the next place. Needless to say, that place had no air conditioning either.

The part-time job was akin to penance as you move from one room without air condition to another all day long in the middle of summer in Japan. The musician claimed the air conditioning assembling job as such and back then, Zenjirou sat in his living room with air conditioned and ate rice crackers while commenting “Ahaha, oh really” with a laugh.

So, why was he remembering something from more than ten years ago now? The answer was simple.

“Damn it. The sweat got into my eye! I can’t see the scale of the level!”

“Zenjirou-sama, are you alright?”

“Z- Zenjirou-sama, please watch your step!”

At the present time, Zenjirou was sweating all over as he tried to assemble the “air conditioning” inside the inner palace, where it was so hot that he would rather spent his time in the midsummer of Japan.

“…Good, I got the backboard done…!”

Some way or other, he managed to assemble the back board of the air conditioning at the wall of the bedroom and he muttered that with an expression like he was already satisfied with having accomplished just that.

“Zenjirou-sama, here, a towel.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Zenjirou took a well-chilled towel from the tall waiting maid, standing at attention next to him, and wiped the sweat from his face.

“…Fuh, I feel alive again.”

In the stuffy bedroom, he had stood on a ladder, set against the wall, and done unfamiliar work. The expression “feel alive again” was by no means an exaggeration.

With the help of the waiting maids, who had steadied the ladder or held up the back board, he somehow had succeeded in attaching the metal back board, glowing in a silver light, to the three wooden supports in a straight line with long screws.

“I’ve gotta be grateful to the carpenters. And I did cause some troubles to Aura yesterday. I’ve to reciprocate the favour later on.”

Zenjirou looked up at the just-finished back board and uttered that.

Yesterday he had worked out a special permission for the carpenters to enter the inner palace in order to assemble the air conditioning. They had set up the wooden supports at the wall of the bedroom. The supports were properly stabilized with cross-beams, so it wouldn’t collapse even when the heavy air conditioning unit was attached to it.

The wooden construct with diagonal beams looked rather ugly against the white marble wall, but there was nothing to be done about it.

There was no way he could screw into the marble wall. His original world may have anchor screws and electronic screwdrivers, but unfortunately Zenjirou hadn't considered these peculiar tools when he got ready to move to another world.

Anyway, after he wiped the sweat off his face with the cold towel and heaved a sigh, Zenjirou noticed that the waiting maid were standing respectfully at attention around him and called out to them.

"You can help yourself to the chilled towels as well. Ah, drink plenty of water as well. I wouldn't want you to suffer a heatstroke or dehydration."

The waiting maids, too, had done a tough job as they had steadied the ladder from below and held up the back board while Zenjirou had fastened it in place.

Unless they cooled themselves a bit and drunk enough water, there was a serious chance that they would break down.

"Yes, thank you very much."

"We will gladly take you up on the offer."

The waiting maids, drenched in sweat on their cheeks or scalps, thanked him honestly and quickly moved over to the neighbouring room, where the refrigerator stood.

Left alone in the bedroom, Zenjirou spread the bundle of papers, which he had printed out from various homepages in Japan and showed how to assemble an air conditioning by yourself, on top of the bed and read through them again.

"Hmm, I mounted the back board even to the wall. Next up, I attach the device to it once to see if it holds. After that I lay the plumbing, power cable and drainage hose through the hole in the wall…"

By saying so, he shifted his gaze to the right of the back board, where a round hole gaped in the thick marble wall. It was obviously pointing a bit downward, so that the drain water wouldn't flow back into the device.

"Still, I've gotta say, professionals sure know their stuff, regardless of worlds. The hole got the right size and slope. They worked exactly according to my instructions."

He uttered his admiration as he gazed upon the hole to the right of the back board.

Their skill of opening a hole into the marble wall, which was thicker than his upper arm was long, accurately to his instructions without using any electronic tools was so impressive that he couldn't help but be fascinated.

The first-rate stonemasons of the palace apparently used "Element Magic" of the earth kind. Before opening a hole in the wall, they "weakened the stone" with magic and afterwards they "strengthened the stone" with magic again. Still, it didn't change the fact that they had done an incredible job.

Zenjirou turned over the towel as it had gotten lukewarm from wiping his face once and used the still cool inner part to wipe his face once more. Then he raised a voice to get himself back into spirit.

"Okay, first I'll set-up the internal device. Then pipe the plumbing and stuff outbound. After that, I assemble the external device! …The external device, hmm…"

The sun was blazing outside. He would have to do the same kind of labour he did just now, now out in the courtyard without any shade.

"…Haah."

He glared at the sun shining in from the open window and heaved a sighed.

* * *

Around the time Zenjirou was sweating bullets as he assembled the unfamiliar air conditioning in the garden under the sparse shadow of the parasols held up by the waiting maids, Queen Aura finished her duties in her office and swung by the back yard of the royal palace.

Surrounded by soldiers, wearing white leather armour and carrying short spears, from all sides, Aura walked over the ground dotted with weed with unusual large steps for a woman.

Compared to the front yard, which was kind of the figurehead of the royal palace, or the courtyard, where sometimes parties for privileged guests were held, the back yard could only be described as “bleak”.

To make up for that, though, it was bigger than the other two combined.

The place was allocated to the work of the craftsmen serving in the royal palace.

The stonemasons cut their stones here and the carpenters roughly shaped their wood here. The blacksmiths repaired the weapons of the Palace Knights here and the leathersmiths mended the armours.

In a way, you could call it the “business district” of the royal palace.

The royal palace also accommodated large fields, countless wells and grassland for the livestock used for food. With that in mind, it was self-explanatory that the palace could function as a fortress that was able to withstand a siege if necessary.

That said, the flames of war fortunately had never reached the capital so far, not even in the previous war.

As the craftsmen noticed Aura with the guards following her, they stopped their hands from working for a moment and bowed shortly.

“Greetings. Just keep working.”

Aura called out to them briefly and walked past them.

The craftsmen in the royal palace were allowed to skip the greeting while they were working, even when faced with the Queen. It was surprisingly lenient in that aspect.

The place Aura headed to with fast steps while drawing the attention of the craftsmen, was a wooden shed newly built this year.

It stood besides the canal of the palace and although it was new here, it obviously got special treatment, seeing as it had a waterwheel attached to it.

A couple of men in dirty working clothes stood at attention in front of the shed, waiting for Aura’s arrival.

“Thank you for coming, Your Highness Aura.”

An old man, his hair and beard completely white, greeted her as their representative. His aged, but robust hands, sticking out from the long sleeves of his shirt, were rather gnarled, which distinguished him as a proficient artisan. But a trained eye could see that the muscles hidden behind his shirt had become too weak for him to be still in “active duty”.

As opposed to this, everyone standing behind him were young men in their mid- to late-twenties, who couldn’t conceal their nervousness and had stiffened up due to it.

Their bodies were still slightly built and their palms far from battered.

A retired, old “blacksmith” and still fledgling “blacksmith apprentices”.

Aura had gathered these craftsmen for the “glass manufacture”.

At this moment in time, it was quite unapparent whether this craft would yield any result or not, so it had been impossible to withdraw manpower from the current active generation.

In front of the attentively “glass manufacture team”, Aura threw out her chest largely and talked straightforward.

“Give me a report. I heard you produced some result?”

The aged blacksmith nodded short to her words.

“Yes, Your Highness. According to your instructions, we have heated up a mixture of white sand, milled shells and natural baking soda for five days and five nights at the highest possible temperature and somehow succeeded in melting it together into a fluid substance.

Then we entwined it around an iron rod and cooled it down by suspending it into ash. Please take a look at the result here.”

Saying so, the old blacksmith held out a long and narrow object to Aura with his gnarled hands.

“Good.”

Saying so, she jerked her chin and one of the soldiers, standing at attention by her side, took it from the aged blacksmith. After he frisked the object carefully and had confirmed that nothing was wrong with it, he handed it over to Aura.

She checked the presented object with her own hands and raised a voice.

“…Oho. Certainly.”

To be frank, the object resembled a “greenish obsidian”.

The surface was relatively smooth, it glittered and had an almost pitch-black colour, so that you wouldn’t notice the green tint unless someone pointed it out.

By no means did it look like the “glass” that was used for Zenjirou’s tableware or alcohol bottles.

However, it definitely had a faint transparency when you held it up against the sun. As proof, its shadow, cast onto the hand, in particular was greenish, instead of black.

“Good.”

Seeing that shadow, Aura showed a satisfied smile and nodded.

It was nothing more than a drab pebble without any utility, but at least it proved that the method to create glass, taken from Zenjirou’s DVD, wasn’t mistaken in principle.

Definitely a success for a first try.

“Well done. Continue to specify the manufacturing process of this substance and try to find a method to increase its transparency. I know it is a completely unexplored field of work. You have all the time you need. Failures will be tolerated, too. But giving up on it is not an option. Give it your all from now on as well.”

“Yes! Very well!”

Upon her speech, the old blacksmith lowered his head excessively with these words. The rigid young apprentices behind him quickly followed his lead a second later.

Aura had actually spoken the truth. From the beginning, she herself had never expected that they would create the same glass that she had seen on Zenjirou’s DVD.

It was already “more than she could ask for” that they somehow or other made something that “certainly looked like glass on a closer look” in such a short time.

As a matter of fact, she had heard from Zenjirou that glass was even harder to melt than iron, so she had expected that it would still take some time before it took shape.

“So, how is it going? Right now, you are using a furnace for wrought iron as it is, it seems, but will it suffice in the future?”

The aged blacksmith shook his head with a bitter expression in response to her question.

“Not quite, Your Highness. I believe it to be somewhat problematic. To be honest, it would not be all that strange for the furnace to blow up in our faces at some point from the heat when we continue to repeat the current method. Besides, it takes us five whole days to refine an amount of just this size, so it will prove to be difficult to polish the technique.”

“Hmm… It ultimately might be quicker to advance the manufacture of the so-called “firebricks” at the same time… You are probably understaffed then.”

In a moment of silence, Aura placed her right hand against her chin and was absorbed in thought. And then,

“Okay. I will see what I can do to increase the personnel. But it will not happen right away. Continue your efforts with the current staff for now. I leave it up to your decision whether you keep up with the research of ‘making glass’ itself or rather prioritize the research of the ‘firebricks’. Do the best possible. Understood?”

After saying so, she gave the elder blacksmith a questioning look.

“Understood, Your Highness.”

The former blacksmith humbly accepted the order of the Queen.

With her guards still in tow, Aura left the glass manufacture research shed behind her and walked along the canal towards a different area.

Before long, her eyes beheld a somewhat strange spectacle.

Namely, a great number of “waterwheels” set up parallel to the canal. In total, there stood ten of them in a line.

The common practice would consider it improbable.

If waterwheels were built one after another in such a short range, the hydraulic power would be too weak and the later wheels wouldn’t produce a satisfying power. However, there was no such fear for these waterwheels to begin with.

After all, all of them were only a knee-length tall.

Their dynamic power was pretty useless to begin with.

Aura crouched down, holding up the hem of her dress, and looked at the miniature waterwheels from above. At that very moment.

“Y- Your Highness! You have come by. I would have properly greeted you if you had told me beforehand!”

A middle-aged man with the beginnings of a paunch and a couple of young men with solid physiques came rushing over to her.

Without catching their breathes, the craftsmen tried to prostrate themselves at once, but Aura shrugged her shoulders a bit and stopped them with a wink of her hand.

“Relax. It is a spontaneous visit. Sorry to trouble you with my whim.”

“Very well. How gracious.”

Although they didn’t go as far as prostrating themselves, the waterwheel artisans all lowered their heads deeply.

As Aura had no interest to waste time with unproductive actions, she spoke straightforward here, too.

“I have been told you also got some ‘results’. As far as I can see, though, six of the ten waterwheels are broken.”

“Why, indeed. Amongst the six broken waterwheels, five are of the traditional kind. The last one is a ‘new model’, built according to your instructions.”

“Then the remaining four intact waterwheels are all the new model?”

“Certainly.”

“The knowledge of my husband is impressive…”

Aura muttered that only to herself, so that those around her couldn’t hear it.

This continuous durability test for the waterwheels had been Zenjirou’s idea and realized by Aura as well.

Previously, when Aura had complained in front of Zenjirou how “their waterwheels broke faster than the ones on the Northern Continent”, he had casually remarked that “the numbers of teeth on the meshing cogs were probably not coprime” and his opinion had manifested these ten miniature waterwheels.

The cogs being “coprime” to each other meant that the numbers of teeth on the meshing cogs had no common divisor, except for the number one.

For example, nine and five were “coprime”, because their only common divisor was one. On the other hand, ten and five had five as an additional common divisor to one, thus they weren’t “coprime”.

For meshing cogs it was an extremely important point whether the numbers of their teeth were coprime or not.

When the numbers of teeth of two meshing cogs were “coprime”, then all the teeth geared with each other on the same probability. On the contrary, when they weren’t “coprime”, then only a few teeth geared with each other over and over again, whereas some teeth didn’t gear at all.

What kind of result would that produce?

In the “coprime” case, the two cogs would wear off evenly, allowing for an optimum usage. In the “not-coprime” case, some teeth would wear off most intensive, whereas some other teeth almost didn’t wear off at all, which quickly strained both cogs during a continuous usage.

A crooked cog would start to clatter before long and disintegrate soon after.

As a matter of fact, the average lifespan of coprime cogs was truly ten times longer than non-coprime cogs, even when they were made out of the same materials and with the same precision.

In the modern age of Earth, the cogwheels were made out of carbide with a micron-precise fineness, so its capability smoothed things over, even if the cogs weren’t “coprime”, but the cogwheels used in the waterwheels in this world were only made out of wood, a material that wears off easily, and when the accuracy had been done sloppily, too, the difference became painfully obvious.

“It is just as you have told me, Your Highness. Compared to the cogwheels I have built so far, the ones made in accordance with your instructions last a lot longer.”

Despite the fact that the Queen, an amateur on the field, had given them, experts on the field, an accurate suggestion for improvement, the craftsmen were honestly impressed from the bottom of their hearts without so much as adulating Aura.

Strictly speaking, the recognition was entitled to Zenjirou, not herself, so Aura felt a bit complicated inside, but she wasn’t so careless to let it show on her face now.

“Do not mention it. It was just a whimsical thought of mine. Without your expertise it could not have been done. If anything, I believe your ability to accept my proposal and realize it in such a short time, is all the more praiseworthy. Put out your skills for the Royal Family, for the Kingdom and for myself from now on as well.”

“Very well!”

The waterwheel artisans deeply lowered their heads once more in reaction to the words of the Queen.

Satisfied, Aura looked down onto the bowing craftsmen and showed a bright smile while continuing to speak.

“To keep to the point, I would like to implement this new cogwheel in the waterwheels on the royal domain next. I take that would be no problem?”

Aura sough confirmation, whereat the middle-aged artisan, still humbling himself to the best of his ability, answered with an appealing upward glance.

“Of course not. We can begin right away when you give the order. However, uhm… May I pose one question?”

“Mh? What is it? Speak up.”

She was more or less aware already what the waterwheel artisan wanted to ask, but she urged him to continue with feigned ignorance.

“Yes. With your permission, I will do so. Your Highness, do you intend to share the knowledge about the new cogwheel with the other feudal lords?”

The question was exactly what Aura had been expecting.

(I knew he would be bothered about that. Well, considering his standpoint, it is understandable.)

The new cogwheel had an overwhelmingly longer lifespan than the conventional cogwheel.

Its development was good news for the clients, namely royalty and nobility, and for the consumers, namely farmers, but for a few others its existence meant a considerable harm.

Naturally, it affected the waterwheel artisans.

A longer durability of the cogs meant nothing else, but less work for them.

In a way, they were scrapping at their own mainstay, so their worry was only natural.

Aura kept her poker face, even if she fully comprehended their inner turmoil, and replied in a casual tone.

“Yes, of course I will do so. As the ruler of the Kingdom, I have an obligation to share such benefiting information with my trusted subjects.”

“C- Certainly…”

Despair. The middle-aged craftsman looked like he was acting as a model for a sculpture with such a theme and spoke with a cracked voice.

Aura deliberately ignored how the artisan dropped his shoulders crestfallen and continued somewhat affected.

“Oh, right. This is an entirely different matter, but I am actually thinking of changing your commission system. Right now, you only get paid every time a waterwheel or its repair is commissioned. However, my idea is to leave you in charge of the maintenance and supervision of the finished waterwheels and pay all the incidental expenses in advance at the beginning of the year.”

“Eh? That would mean…”

The waterwheel builder couldn’t comprehend her words right away, but before long, its meaning sunk in and his facial expression underwent another shift.

From despair to delight.

To put it simply: Aura’s suggestion was a “yearly contract”.

So far, the artisans had only been commissioned for repairs every time a waterwheel broke.

As the new version of the waterwheel would decrease the number of broken ones, the occurring cost reduction would directly cut into the income of the craftsmen according to that system.

That in turn would make them fear for their existence.

In order to avoid that from happening, Aura was now saying that she would be paying all the expenses for maintaining the waterwheels in advance at the beginning of each year in a yearly contract and that they didn’t need to pay it back if it later turned out that the waterwheels kept working without any problems.

Naturally, it imposed the obligation on them to work without any additional fees when a waterwheel did break down, but it wouldn’t pose such a big problem, unless the accountant was extremely negligent with the bookkeeping.

(Of course I will let them calculate the annual average of repairs for waterwheels up till now and appoint a slightly smaller salary to the yearly contract.)

Aura thought that to herself, but it would have hardly spoiled the craftsmen’s joy, even if they were able to read her mind.

The waterwheel artisans could avoid the worst case, namely falling into poverty at once, with the system proposed by Aura.

Neither was it in her interest to have the waterwheel-builder roam the streets due to the sudden reform.

Besides, a yearly contract also had the merit that they wouldn’t be pressed for “unexpected additional expenses” one day, so it was easier to calculate the state expenses.

And the craftsmen, too, could arrange their yearly budget better when they received a fixed amount of money at a designated time every year, even if their income was slightly less.

(Well, it is a good compromise. Thanks to my husband, the treasury has a bit more surplus again. The question is, what do I do with that money?)

“Thank you very much, Your Highness. Really, we cannot thank you enough!”

The artisans expressed their gratitude while prostrating on the ground, whereas Queen Aura was already thinking of her next agenda.

* * *

Late evening on the same day.

Zenjirou and Aura were coincidentally running into each other in one section of the inner palace. To be more precisely, in the room of their beloved son Carlos Zenkichi Carpa aka Prince Carlo-Zen.

Aura was always heading straight towards her son once her duties in the royal palace were over, but it was a rare sight to find Zenjirou there.

That phrasing might sound like his fatherly affection for his son was lacking compared to Aura's motherly feelings, but that was by no means the case.

Since he didn't speak the native language of the western part of the South Continent, he was forbidden to speak in front of the prince as it would disturb the first phase of the child's acquisition of language.

No matter how careful he may be, he would end up speaking to his son anyway when he spent a long time with him, since that was human nature. Therefore, Zenjirou regretfully refrained from staying in the room of his son for too long.

"….."

He looked around the room of his beloved son without saying a word.

The room was maybe around thirteen square metre large at best. For a room in the inner palace it was rather small.

That said, it had originally been larger, but wooden partition walls had deliberately been set up to make it smaller. Of course with good reason.

So, why would they go through all the trouble to make a large room smaller?

The reason for that became obvious once you set foot into the room.

Coolth. Although the sun had already set considerable, the temperature was still at thirty-five degree, but in this room alone it clearly felt more than five degree colder.

Responsible for that were the big "block of ice" in the corner of the room and the young waiting maid moving a large fan with all her might.

The man-made wind brushed over the block of ice and distributed its cold air to the entirety of the room. The chilly breeze could make Prince Carlo-Zen, an infant, sick instead when it was aimed at him directly, so they weren't doing that, of course.

The room temperature was lowered through ice and a large fan. To maximize its effect, the room had been partitioned, because the larger the room, the weaker the cooling effect of the ice.

"Ah, Zenjirou-sama, please excuse me for remaining like this."

"…."

The waiting maid greeted him without resting her hand from moving the fan, whereas Zenjirou acknowledged her with just a wordless nod.

It had to be quite the tough job to keep fanning without rest, even if they were working in turns.

(I could've brought the electronic fan over here, if only the extension cable were longer.)

That thought was crossing his mind in light of the maid's effort, but if he actually were to do that, the waiting maids would surely make a fuss.

To be honest, the task of fanning the block of ice was currently the most desired assignment amongst the waiting maids of the inner palace.

It definitely was a strenuous effort to keep fanning the ice, but the jobs of the waiting maids were all kind of strenuous in their own way anyway.

That being the case, a task alongside a cool block of ice was naturally preferred over the other tasks. At least it was no exaggeration to call it "heavenly" when comparing it to the tasks of mowing the lawn under the blazing sun or keeping watch on the fire in the oven at the kitchen.

While Zenjirou was lost in thought like that, Aura quietly approached the cradle with their sleeping son and peeked into it.

"…Fuah?"

As if to match the look of his mother, Prince Carlo-Zen opened his big eyes, blinking.

“Mh? You were awake, Carlos?”

Aura pursed her mouth a bit disgruntled, as she had missed the chance to catch a glimpse of the sleeping face of her adorable child.

“Yes. He woke up earlier and appears to be in a good mood right now.”

The wet nurse said so with a bright smile, but faint, dark circles were showing under her eyes.

Most likely, our little prince had been crying throughout the last night again, breaking the well-deserved sleep of the wet nurse.

Every time Aura witnessed these hardships of the wet nurse, she was reminded of the fact that she, the Queen, was unable to properly fulfil her obligations as a mother.

Precisely because of that she had to cherish the time she could spent with her child like this.

“May I pick him up?”

It was a bit humiliating to have to ask for the wet nurse’s permission to hold her own child, but right now, the child was more familiar with the wet nurse, who was raising him, instead of his biological mother, so Aura had to soft-pedal.

“Why, of course, Your Highness. Please give the prince some motherly warmth.”

“Yes.”

Hearing the wet nurse’s words, Aura softly put her hands around Prince Carlo-Zen’s head and body and very carefully picked up the unbelievable warm and soft creature.

“Ahh!”

The lifted baby laughed happily in the arms of his mother and stretched out his chubby and small hands towards her face.

“Fufufu, what is the matter, Carlos? What are these hands going to do?”

Her usual dignified manner vanished and her expression slackened so much it could be called “slovenly”. In order to stick her face against his hands, the Queen inclined her head and brought his smooth body closer to her face.

“Ada, Dah, Ahh.”

The palms of the prince, still smaller than two fingers of Aura together, caressed her face patting.

“Fuh, Fufufu, oh my? Hey, that tickles.”

“Ah, Ahh, Adah.”

The scene between the mother and her child was so heart-warming that it automatically conjured a smile on your face.

So far the father had been silent, but he seemed to have hit his limit and approached the two, opening his mouth.

“Zenkichi, it’s me, papa!”

The words coming from his mouth were in the “language of the western part of the South Continent”.

It had been a bit more than a year, since Zenjirou had come into this world. Consequently, he had learned the words of this world to some extent and could use a bit of the native language now.

That said, his communication skills in the language were at best the same as a Japanese middle school student had for English. Nevertheless, hundreds of vocabularies were floating around in his head.

Amongst all these, the earlier uttered words “it’s me, papa” were the only ones that had been approved with an “unproblematic intonation” by Aura and his home tutor Octavia.

His “pronunciation” for all the other words was still “too rough” for now, so he wasn’t allowed to speak them in front of Prince Carlo-Zen.

Thus, he put all his affection for his son into that short phrase.

“Zenkichi, it’s me, papa!”

Saying so, Zenjirou flapped his arms about besides his face and looked into his face with a clownish expression.

“Fuah? Ah, Ahh!”

His son switched his gaze from his mother to his father, as either the grimace had been funny or the flapping arms had caught his attention.

“Muh…”

But Aura wasn’t amused. Zenjirou may be her beloved husband, but during her limited time with her child, he was a rival that competed with her for the attention of this lovely, little angel.

“Aw, Carlos. Look my way. You like Mama the best, right?”

“Ada, Dah.”

She called out to him while dandling him in her arms, which kind of forcefully brought his attention back to her.

“Heh.”

After regaining the interest of her child, the Queen gave Zenjirou a challenging glance and smirked victorious.

That definitely seemed to have provoked him a bit. As if accepting her challenge, he drew closer to their child once more and spoke.

“Zenkichi, it’s me, papa!”

Unfortunately however, these words were the only thing he was allowed to utter.

“Carlos loves Mama! Papa only comes in second! Papa accepts that, too, right?”

While Mama was having her way, Papa was shaking his head with all his might and said.

“Zenkichi, it’s me, papa!”

As he showed a desperate look on his face, Aura grinned devious and continued.

“What is the matter? Just say so when I am wrong. Right, Carlos?”

“Zenkichi, it’s me, papa!”

“Oho, what a loud voice. It will scare Carlos. You are scary, Papa, so scary.”

Aura stifled a laughter with all her might in view of the frantic Zenjirou and turned her back to him as to keep the prince in her arms out of his view.

On a closer look, even the wet nurse, sitting on a chair at the side, and the waiting maid, still working the fan, were choking laughter and shaking their shoulders, but Zenjirou was in no position to notice that right now.

He must have realized that Aura was teasing him, but he turned completely hopeless and circled her with loud steps, then

“ZENKICHI, IT’S ME, PAPA!”

said that with his loudest voice today.

A sudden appearance from behind, a frantic expression and a loud voice.

The result of these three factors coming together was…

“F- Fu- Fuueeeeeeh!”

Their beloved son was crying aloud.

* * *

“Pffft….!”

“Aura… You’re laughing too much…”

As Aura kept on laughing on top of the couch in the living room, Zenjirou, sitting across from her, reprimanded her with an ill-humoured expression.

“F- Forgive me. Still… It, it is no good. Your miserable face when you made Carlos cry was just so priceless… I, I cannot hold back, Ahaha!”

“…..”

Zenjirou angrily averted his eyes from his wife, who was convulsed with laugher to tears.

Apparently nothing he could say would make her stop.

After making his most beloved son cry, he had fled the scene, leaving the rest to Aura and the wet nurse, and returned to the living room, where he had abandoned himself to depression for a while. As soon as Aura had returned to the room a bit later, she had been in this state.

Frankly speaking, it was no pleasure to see his wife laughing endlessly while she lied flat on her face on the sofa, battering it at a mad pace.

On a rare occasion, Zenjirou gave her a final warning with a low voice while looking down on his wife, who was splitting her sides laughing, with a sharp glance.

“Aura. Why don’t you give it a rest already?”

“Ahahaha. O- Okay. I will stop now… W- Wait, cannot. Ahahaha!”

Even his final warning was seemingly ignored.

Oh well. Since his final warning had been ignored, this called for “drastic measures”.

“…..”

Standing up wordlessly, Zenjirou slowly approached the couch on which Aura was laughing her head off.

“Hah! If you want to laugh that bad, laugh all you want!”

He fell upon Aura with a flop.

“Wait, Zenjirou!?”

“You little!”

Now on top of her, he proceeded to tickle her waist and armpits with both his hands.

“Hii!? Hey, Hyah, Hihihihi, St- Stop…!”

“Take this!”

Aura should have been stronger than him, but because of her unfavourable position, Zenjirou pinned her down on the couch and had his way with her.

“Ahahaha, w- wait. Stop, Fuahahaha!”

“There, there!”

As Zenjirou himself started to enjoy it before long, he showed a slightly devious smile while he continued to vehemently tickle the body of beloved wife with his hands. The tables had turned compared to the situation in the private room of the prince.

Taking advantage of the situation, Zenjirou had his fill of exploring all kind of places: Her waist, armpits, inner thighs, nape of the neck and soles of feet, but also the bulging points in the front of the body as well as the back of her body just below the waist.

“Hihi, st… op…!”

“Hehehe, you cutie. C’mon, what’s the harm?”

“Hey! It is me or has your personality changed?”

In the end, the couple messed around passionately and intimately until the waiting maid in charge of the bath came by to report that their bath was ready.

* * *

After cleaning themselves from the daily sweat and dirt in the bath, Zenjirou and Aura returned to the living room in their usual casual nightwear.

“Good grief. I admit that I went a bit too far in teasing you in front of Carlos and I certainly am at fault for laughing afterwards, too, but that still does not warrant your actions. It would have been fine if you had just tickled me, but despite my warning that it would trouble my position as the Ruler if I were to bear another child now, you just went and…”

“Sorry, it was just a little prank.”

“…You remove a woman’s clothing for a prank?”

“If she’s my wife, yes, sometimes.”

While quarrelling with each other friendly, the two of them didn’t make themselves comfortable on the couches in the living room like always, but instead headed straight for the bedroom.

“Jeez… Oh well. Well then, how about you show me that device you have been talking about? The ‘air conditioning’, was it? You assembled it, right?”

“Yeah, well, more or less. It’s working without problems so far, I think.”

With a diffident expression, Zenjirou replied like that to Aura and grabbed the door knob of the bedroom.

The complete assemble of the air conditioning almost took a whole day. On its test run, it had blown out cold air without any problems, so he had left it turned on.

And since then, the door of the bedroom hadn’t been opened even once.

“It was running the whole time. If it really works like it should, then by now…”

Still grasping the door knob, Zenjirou closed his eyes and after a deep breath, he yanked the door open with a wishful expression.

“…Hell yeah!”

Just like he had hoped, a stream of cold air unthinkable for the hot season of the Carpa Kingdom greeted him from beyond the door.

“Now that is impressive. The light and refrigerator surprised me, too, when I saw them for the first time, but this raises the ante.”

Sitting down on their shared king-sized bed, Aura held out her hands towards the chilling breeze from the newly assembled air conditioning and said impressed.

The cool air felt quite comfortable on her flushed body as she had just gotten out of the bath.

“Fuh…”

She narrowed her eyes to slits like a cat that was being stroked under the chin, but noticed the sullen expression of her husband as he sat down next to her.

“What is the matter, Zenjirou? Why the long face? Did something upset you?”

Zenjirou scratched his face awkwardly while his beloved wife peeked at it from the side.

“Yeah, well, to be honest, it’s still not ideal. The room is too big for the output and even if we close the wooden shutters, hot air will come in here and there, because it’s not really airtight.

Right now it’s quite refreshing, because it’s night, but we can’t expect it to be just as cool during the day, when the sunlight comes in through all the openings.”

Saying so, he heaved a sigh.

It had been pure luck that he managed to get the air conditioning running on his first try, but considering the house construction in modern Japan, it still couldn't be denied that the blessing of the air conditioning was weak here.

The domestic air conditioning he had bought was designed for around forty square metre at best, but their bedroom was at least fifty square metre big.

And like he mentioned just now: The buildings in the Carpa Kingdom had a poor air impermeability.

A night like this aside, it seemed unlikely that the device could cope with the sun of the hottest season, which exceeded forty degrees during the day.

"Now, are you not asking too much?"

Aura widened her eyes a bit surprised, whereas Zenjirou replied with a wry smile.

"Mhm, guess so. But I just can't shake off this refreshing image from the 'other world' when I think of an air conditioned room. Besides, the biggest problem still isn't solved yet."

"The biggest problem?"

His wife asked back, whereat Zenjirou nodded once and glared up to the turned on air conditioning.

"Yeah. The problem whether I really did assemble it correctly or not. For now, it's working alright, not making any weird noises, nor leaking any water. But from what I've heard, it often happens that it gradually wears off when wrongly assembled and then breaks down after a few days."

If that were to happen, time would have to be reverted with the "Time Reversal" magic for these few days in order to repair it.

And that certainly exceeded a "favour" he could ask of Aura. He would have no choice but to give up on the air conditioning when that ever happened.

(My only ray of hope is that I'll be able to fix it myself in the future when I learn 'Time Reversal' and 'Future Compensation'.)

"Future Compensation" was referring to yet another secret spell of the Space-Time Magic.

To put it simply: It was a difficult technique that allowed you to activate a magic, whose output exceeded your maximum amount of magical power, by also paying the magical power from your future self, for example one or two days in the future.

Naturally, you wouldn't be able to use any magic at all for the expended time, so Aura would never be in a position to use it, but Zenjirou was basically not part of the military strength, so he had the chance to use it.

Needless to say, it was more than likely that his magical power, too, would be continuously used for the "national benefit" when he finally could use magic, so he would hardly get any opportunities to use it freely.

Either way, even the most optimistic estimate said it would take him at least until next year to be able to use that magic. At that point, he would have to revert time back for nearly "one year", if he wanted to return the air conditioning to its state before the assemble.

To wind back that much time, he would surely have to pay a couple of months worth of magical power with "Future Compensation". Although it was his own magical power, it occurred to him that it would be too selfish to use it like that, considering his position as royalty.

"Well, it's no use worrying my brain. So far, it's working without problems, so let's enjoy its blessing for now."

Zenjirou came to such a clean decision, whereupon Aura nodded and expressed her opinion.

"Hmm, indeed. Then we have to bring a table and chairs into the bedroom first thing tomorrow. It would feel wrong to take breakfast and do our chats at noon on the edge of the bed."

"Aura… You're totally up for moving into the bedroom, aren't you?"

He inadvertently showed a wry smile as his beloved wife was surprisingly eager for it.

Once they had settled onto the bed, over which the cool air of the air conditioning blew, it was no longer an option for them to return to the living room full of hot air.

Since they still had time until lights out, the royal couple was enjoying a night chat while they sat next to each other on the edge of the bed.

“Then you spent almost all of your day assembling this ‘air conditioning’?”

“Yep. And it’s no exaggeration, I literally took all day for it. Even though there’s so much else I want to do, like making soap or distilling alcohol.”

Zenjirou answered Aura’s question like that and nodded.

Recently, he was appearing at official events in the royal palace as Aura’s proxy, so he didn’t have as much spare time as before anymore. Due to that, there were hardly any days anymore, where he had nothing to do daylong, but today he neither had the time, nor the energy to do anything else.

Assembling the air conditioning amidst temperatures of over forty degrees had been quite an arduous job for Zenjirou.

That said, the soldiers on the Salt Road were marching for days under that blazing sun, but if he were allowed to say his honest opinion, he would claim that all soldiers were “superhuman”.

(I really have to get used to the climate here… Though, saying that the day I assembled the air conditioning, isn’t really convincing.)

Zenjirou was lamenting in his mind, but the matter actually only came to his mind, because he did set-up the air conditioning.

After all, it was human nature to only think of a way to escape a bothersome situation they found themselves in. Because they wanted to get away from the trouble, they started to set praiseworthy goals.

Anyway, he concluded that it was not the time to think about it now, so he told his wife, sitting next to him, what he intended to do from now on in order to change the topic.

“Well, I’ll continue with the soap and alcohol whenever I’ve time. I can’t work at my own sweet will anymore, since I’ve more stuff to do in the palace these days.”

Aura frowned a bit upon the words from her husband.

“I can allocate less work for you when there is something else you would like to do. And I have more or less recovered anyway.”

She proposed that out of consideration for her husband, not because she was thinking lowly of him. But he didn’t accept the good will of his wife.

“And repeat the same drama like last year when you give birth again? No thanks. I’m not proud of it, but I’m just an average guy. Even if I’ve mastered something, I’m sure I’ll forget it after half a year of not making use of it.”

“That certainly is not something to be proud of.”

Her husband replied puffed up with pride, whereupon Aura showed a wry smile and shrugged her shoulders. Then she said with a solemn face.

“Fine. To be honest, I have been underestimating the situation last year as well. I would definitely be quite grateful when you continue with the same workload as now. But please do not misunderstand me. I am not just saying it from the deep of my heart, but also because I expect the things you make to have a good influence on the country.”

Hearing these words, Zenjirou scratched his head with a troubled expression.

“Um, well, I would prefer if you don’t place such high hopes on me. I’m just an amateur messing around with superficial knowledge. To be honest, I’m expecting to fail nine out of ten times. Ah, but maybe something was useful, seeing as you mentioned it?”

He asked that as he apparently noticed it mid-sentence, whereupon Aura nodded with a grin.

“Yes. At noon, I visited the craftsmen I had given instructions before and their results exceeded my expectations. Firstly, the glass. They made something satisfying on their first attempt already. I will show it to you tomorrow. Well, it is only a shiny black stone with a greenish tint, mind you. However, it shows that we are on the right track.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

Zenjirou was honestly impressed.

Somehow or other their efforts bore fruit, relying only on the sparse information about the materials and the rough explanations that were worlds apart from being manufacturing instructions. Appreciation was definitely in order.

“Naturally, there are still a lot of problems. The pitch-black stone can hardly be called glass at this point and the technique to shape it into the desired form has yet to be refined as well. Above all, the typical earthen furnaces of our country cannot bear the high temperatures needed to melt glass. The craftsmen said that the furnaces would not even last ten attempts at this rate.”

Aura’s expression made a complete turn into a bitter one as she recited the current set of problems.

Likewise making a solemn face, Zenjirou assumed the thinker’s pose with his right hand and pondered.

“Hmm, then we really need the ‘firebricks’, I guess.”

“I am afraid we do.”

Aura consented and snorted frustrated.

It seemed that she really wasn’t pleased with the “method to make firebricks”, which she had seen on the DVD before.

No wonder, considering that the explanation said to “bake a mixture of clay and squelched old firebricks in a furnace made of firebricks”, which was not the least bit helpful.

Zenjirou didn’t want his wife to get any more moody before bedtime, so he quickly continued in a flustered manner.

“Ehm, the remaining problems are how to shape the glass and make it colourless, right? I think the most realistic method to shape the glass would be to wrap it around a long pipe and blow air into it, just like the TV showed it. Though I’ve heard that window glass is recently done with the ‘Pilkington process’.”

He stared at the ceiling of the bedroom, which was illuminated by the orange LED floor lamps, while he recalled his unreliable smattering of knowledge.

“Mh? I watched the blowing technique together with you, but I have never heard of that ‘Pilkington process’ before.”

Seemingly curious, his wife leaned over a bit in her nightgown, which fascinated Zenjirou as he answered faithfully.

“I don’t know much either, so I can only give you a rough explanation. In short, they make sheets of glass by letting the molten glass float in molten metal that has a lower melting temperature than glass. In this way you get an even sheet of glass that’s smooth on both sides without having to polish it. Just think of it how melted lard floats in boiling water. When you leave it like that for a while, the lard solidifies into a flat shape, right? Same stuff.”

“I see. That sounds rather extravagant, but I understand the general principle.”

Aura displayed her comprehension with a nod, but her expression didn’t look like she was all that impressed. It reflected the different expectation the two of them had towards “glass”.

Speaking of glass, Zenjirou immediately associated window glass with it, whereas Aura’s greatest interest was a spherical glass— the glass marble.

So it was only natural that she wouldn’t be in interested in the manufacture method called Pilkington process.

In fact, the float glass manufacture was way more difficult than glassblowing. It was necessary to control the temperature in the bath of molten metal, where the glass would float in, and there was the danger that the workers would inhale the vaporized metal.

In the modern age, most of the production lines were automated, managed by computers, so it was an effective method there, but considering the level of technology in this world, it might actually be more effective to have the craftsmen flatten the glass they made through glassblowing or rather its practical application, the crown process, by hand.

Zenjirou didn't take all that into account, but he still realized that the interest of his wife wasn't really piqued.

"That leaves us with the question how to make the glass colourless. I guess we'll have to follow the TV show for that, too, and get rid of the iron content in the sand as best as possible. That means we grind the sand more carefully, stir it in water and separate out the upper layer of the sediment."

Moving on to the next problem, Zenjirou inclined his head in thought again.

Even the TV show about manufacturing glass explained it only briefly, but the main reason that glass stained was hat metal particles were mixed in the sand.

The simplest and most realistic measure against it was to remove as much metal particles as possible from the sand.

First you grinded the sand as finely as possible, so that it was easier to extract the metal particles. Then you put that sand into a barrel with a lot of water and stirred it thoroughly. Afterwards you let all the sand sediment.

By doing so, the heavier metal particles settled down first and the lighter sand fell on top of it.

After that you only had to scoop the upper layer of the sediment.

Hearing his answer, the Queen placed one hand against her chin, which had started to regain its original edge from the recent training, and replied.

"Yes, you already have explained the course of action to me when we saw that video, so I had them work that way, but the result was as I mentioned earlier. Maybe they did not grind it carefully enough or did not mix it sufficiently with the water?"

"Hmm, or the sand itself may be the problem. I think there is actually a pretty fine line between suitable and non-suitable sand for glass. If the sand's no good from the beginning, then it might be useless, no matter how hard you try."

To put it bluntly: No matter how thoroughly you grinded black sand, which was as good as iron sand, there would be no grand refinement.

Of course it was quite conceivable that they didn't grind carefully enough or messed up either the stirring or the scooping, like Aura had said, so there was no guarantee that Zenjirou's opinion was correct.

However, his opinion sounded more than plausible to Aura's ears as well.

"Certainly. The suitability of the sand itself, eh. Maybe we should bring in various kinds of sand from each region."

"Yeah, that sounds good. Lastly, the TV series was showing the removal of the iron content with a magnet, too. I do have a couple of magnets attached to the refrigerator door, but I think they're too weak to magnetise any iron splinters. Otherwise I could use the rechargeable batteries as a DC supply and build a simple electromagnet if I had a bit of copper wire."

Zenjirou dug up the middle school science lessons from his memory, whereupon Aura asked with her head inclined in puzzlement.

"Copper wire? What is that? Does it by chance refer to a strand of copper?"

"Yep. You take copper, rolled into a long and narrow shape like a thread, and wind it around a magnetic core. When you run electricity though it then, it creates a magnetic field. In school we experimented like that to turn iron into a magnet, but I guess you don't have copper wires here? Technically you could use iron wires instead, too, but it'll be less effective. Copper is the best metal conductor after silver after all."

Questioned by him, Aura crossed her arms under her voluminous breasts and contemplated.

"Hmm, we definitely do not have something like that in our country as of now. The question is if the craftsmen in the palace can actually make it when I order them to… It sounds difficult to make something that thin. And you even have to coil it, right? Then it must be rather flexible. It would be a bit more expensive, but using silver instead of copper might give us brighter prospects. A silversmith would be most suited for a delicate job like that."

Zenjirou showed a bit of surprise upon her answer, but nodded with a convinced expression immediately afterwards.

“Ah, right. We’re not going to mass-produce them, but rather do a small-scale experiment, so it shouldn’t get all that expensive, even with silver. Okay. When it got brighter conditions, let’s do it that way. Meanwhile, I’ll make preparations, too, and locate the workbench outside into the shadow of the courtyard.”

As a laymen, Zenjirou couldn’t predict what kind of influence a magnetic field would have on its surroundings.

It was hard to see that an electromagnet powered by mere batteries would damage the electrical appliances like the computer, but lack of experience could be dangerous. Better safe than sorry.

Working outside amidst the heat was somewhat troublesome, but it was nothing unbearable when in the shadows of the trees or near the fountain.

“Fine. I will arrange the silversmiths. And I will let them bring in sand from as many regions as possible as a test as well.”

“Yeah, please do.”

The discussion about the glass was thus concluded for now.

Following, Aura started to talk about the results of the “waterwheel” experiment.

“Then there was your idea of making the teeth of the waterwheels ‘coprime’. The result is astonishing. Just like you have said, the coprime cogs last a lot longer than the other.”

Unable to prevent her face from naturally forming a smile and her eyes producing sparkles, Aura declared with an excited voice.

“Oh, so it went well. Good. It was actually quite worried, since I only knew it by hearsay.”

“The difference was truly extramundane. Right now the miniature wheels, deliberately made out of softwood, are still in the experimental phase, but the artisans guaranteed that the actual implementation would work as well.”

Now she could save a little on the budget for the management of the waterwheels in the Kingdom. Aura’s smile as she said that, was brimming with the intensity of a Ruler and to be honest, Zenjirou was backing off a bit on top of the bed.

(Ahaha, my wife’s beautiful and kind, but just as intimidating.)

The Queen, not aware of the impression of her husband, crossed her arms beneath her overly prominent two breasts and mused happily.

“This will be an additional income for the royal family first and last. Unlike the previous case with the money from the accounting books, I can use this however I like. Fufufu, it may not be an impressive amount by itself, but saving expenses every year will make a big difference. Time to dream bigger.”

By the way, the suggestion of running a test phase with numerous miniature waterwheels of the same design except for the cog teeth as well as the idea of changing to a yearly contract in order to avoid a loss in the waterwheel industry, actually originated from Zenjirou.

He himself wasn’t thinking much of it, but Aura was now thinking even more highly of him than before.

However,

“Mhm, I’m glad. I really am, but since it’s some precious extra money, I hope it can be used as effectively as possible. Maybe you could consider its use carefully once you have settled down a bit?”

Zenjirou patted the shoulder of his wife to calm her down while he said so, whereupon Aura quickly regained her composure as if her earlier delight had just been an act.

“No, I am afraid that I will not have the time to think it through for a while. Now is the only time I can spare time like this as well. Truth be told, I received a report from the Twin Kingdom that said that Prince Francesco and Princess Bona have set out for our country. Before long, the Prince and Princess of the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell will arrive here. Once they do, we both will be extremely limited in our free time.”

If anything, then now, was Aura saying, whereat Zenjirou inadvertently heaved a sigh.

“Uhh, it already has reached that point?”

“Yes. They are travelling in a large dragon carriage and its speed is affected by the weather and other factors, so it is not certain when they will arrive, but if everything goes well, we expect them to arrive in around a month time. From then on, we both will be busy with hospitality. You better say your farewells to the leisurely days while you can.”

Infected by Zenjirou, Aura likewise heaved a deep sigh.

The royalty of the Twin Kingdom was coming.

In face of such a big event, other circumstances or the sentiments of the involved people became secondary.

Just as Aura had said, there would follow a whole series of days, where he entertained the guests while hiding his vigilance and tension behind a smile. Even if the Prince Consort was to keep a low profile, it didn’t change the fact that he was one of the two current members of the royal family.

Zenjirou’s schedule would definitely become booked out for a while.

“Got it. I’ll try my best.”

Slouching his shoulders largely once, he exhaled all the gloomy air after a deep breath, pulling himself together. Only then he spoke.

Still sitting on the bed, the royal couple then continued their business talk for a little while longer, but it was interrupted by the sound of the cell phone left on the edge of the bed.

“Oh, it’s my alarm.”

“Oh my, bedtime already? I guess time really flies when the temperatures are comfortable.”

Wallowing about on the king-sized bed, Zenjirou fetched the cell phone and stopped the alarm, whereas Aura said regretfully.

He had set the alarm of the cell phone just in case, so that they wouldn’t forget the time and miss out on sleep, but it turned out to be useful at once.

“Yeah, we could talk all night like this. Let’s just go to bed.”

Taking the remote control of the air conditioning, Zenjirou pressed a button, whereupon Aura declared a bit disappointed.

“Grml, you are turning it off?”

Zenjirou made a wry smile as his wife had been totally charmed by the refreshing breeze.

“No, I’m not turning it off. I just switched the setting to the night mode. It wouldn’t really be healthy to have the air conditioning working at full power while we sleep.”

“Ohh…”

When he saw his wife inclining her head disappointed, he felt the urge to take back his words and put the air conditioning on full power again.

In reality, the temperatures didn’t even fall below thirty degree during the night, so leaving the air conditioning at full power might actually provide for a more “appropriate” room temperature instead. However, there was no need to take any risks on the first day.

“I’m turning of the lights, okay?”

“Yes, okay.”

Zenjirou temporarily got off the bed and switched off the orange LED floor lamps that were illuminating the bedroom.

With the lights off, the bedroom was now covered in a pitch-black darkness, since the wooden shutters of the windows were closed and didn’t let any moonlight in.

But he had grown perfectly accustomed to his home already.

Zenjirou returned to the bed without problems amidst the darkness, hopped into it and crawled into the middle, where his beloved wife was awaiting him.

Even in this obscurity, Aura apparently could make out his silhouette as she accurately reached out her arms for him while he came crawling over on all fours, guiding him next to her.

“Zenjirou…”

“Mm, thanks.”

The couple obviously held hands, exchange a kiss in the most natural manner and lay side by side as a matter of course.

“Good night.”

“Yeah, night.”

The arrival of the Prince and Princess of the Twin Kingdom would surely cause a commotion, for better or for worse. As royalty, it was the role of the Queen and the Prince Consort to handle and control the fuss.

Aura did not know what kind of troubles would await the two of them from now on, not even with her Space-Time magic. But for that very reason, they ought to devote at least the night-time to a peaceful slumber, where they were only conscious of each other.

The loving wedded pair fell into a quiet sleep, embracing each other so closely that they felt the partner’s body temperature and breathe on their skin and ear, respectively.

Extra Chapter: Culture Clash between the Waiting Maids and their Master

The waiting maids working in the inner palace held Zenjirou in high esteem.

Daring to lay it on the line: They were regarding him as an “easy-care master”.

He wasn’t nitpicking about their jobs. He wasn’t giving out orders on a whim. He didn’t scold them when a given task wasn’t completed on time due to some circumstances as long as they explained it with a legit reason. And he didn’t forget to thank them when they completed a task.

Individually, these points were nothing special, but an accumulation of such trivial considerateness yielded a “comfortable environment”.

As such, it was only natural that Zenjirou was held in high esteem by the waiting maids.

However, nothing, whatever it may be, was ever “perfect” to the last detail. Thus, it wasn’t like the waiting maids had no complaints at all in regard to him.

He rarely let them into the living room or bedroom. He didn’t give straight orders due to his modesty. And his taste in food gravely differed from a person of the Carpa Kingdom as he came from a different world. All kind of “complaints” came up when each maid was cited.

But most of their opinions would surely unite when the entire team of waiting maids had to name “the one complaint that they considered as the worst”.

Namely: “His abnormal ‘fondness of baths’.”

On a certain midmorning, a couple of waiting maids were cleaning the ridiculous large bathroom of the inner palace with heart and soul. As the Carpa Kingdom had high temperatures, physical labour tended to be done during the relatively cool morning or evening.

The water had been drained from the two baths, which were large enough to be mistaken has small pools, and the barefooted maids scrubbed the slimy floor with long scrubbers for all they were worth while sweating on their foreheads.

It was a stiff job without the slightest appeal.

“Aw, Ugh, my hips hurt~!”

It was understandable that the young maids would utter words of complaint.

A petite maid with a short haircut wailed, whereupon the tall maid scrubbing next to her replied with a snapping tone.

“This place echoes, so keep your ridiculous loud voice to yourself, Fay. To begin with, you’re short, so you should have it better than me. I’ve to work stooping the whole time.”

The petite maid with short hair— Fay was told off like that by the tall maid.

As to back up her words, the tall maid— Dolores took her right hand off the handle of the brush and tapped her numb hip with a clenched fist.

In fact, Dolores did have a point. The higher up your hips were when cleaning a low place, the greater the strain.

Although that was indeed the case for cleaning stooped with just a cloth, a size difference hardly affected the burden when cleaning with a long scrubber. Her nerves, too, had been stretched by the monotone and tough labour. In other words, she was just venting her anger.

But the girl called Fay wasn’t so well-mannered that she would quietly put up with that outburst.

“Say what? Your voice is way louder. The volume of your voice is proportional to your body size after all, you mountain!”

“As if. If that were true, your voice should be too faint to even reach my ears.”

“I’m not that small!”

Even while cursing at each other, the two of them were still moving the scrubbers in their hands for now, which was truly praiseworthy.

Because they were cleaning the wet floor, their skirts were rolled up at the waist part even more than usually, making it a mini-skirt way above their knees. Sandal-like shoes, made out of skin from a Water Dragon, were slipped over their bare feet without socks. Their outfit in itself was rather alluring and charming.

However, there wasn’t a shred of sexiness, regardless of how sensual their getup was, because the maids were digging their feet into the floor bowlegged and glaring at the floor with hostility while gritting their teeth.

“I keep telling you, you’re too noise, Shorty.”

“You’re the noisy one, Mountain!”

The verbal quarrel between the two girls was reverberating from the stone walls of the huge bath. As their dispute heated up, their hands inevitable stopped.

At some point, the small and the tall girl had dropped everything and were just glaring at each other during their work. Needless to say, their present superior wouldn’t overlook their disgraceful behaviour.

“…..”

The middle-aged waiting maid, who had worked her brush quietly in one corner of the bath, wordlessly picked up the water bucket at her feet and splashed about its entire content.

“Wah!?”

“Kyaa!?”

Fay and Dolores jumped up with a scream when the cold water suddenly hit their bare feet. The older maid must have held back, seeing as the water didn’t splash on them any higher than their skirt.

The middle-aged maid glared at them with half-closed eyes and breathed her words with a sigh.

“I don’t see your hands moving. Do your job.”

“Y- Yes, I am sorry, Olsha-sama.”

“F- Forgive me, Olsha-sama.”

The scolding from the middle-aged maid in charge of cleaning, Olsha, wasn’t really all that harsh, but Fay and Dolores flinched exaggerated as if they had been hit with a whip.

In charge of cleaning, Olsha was an average woman of middle age without any striking traits in particular.

If there was such a thing as a trait, it would be how she always kept her eyes half-closed as if she was sleepy.

“…..”

The tight-lipped and inexpressive waiting maid quietly returned to her own task, her interest lost after confirming with a glance that her subordinators quickly got back to work.

She was neither as faultfinding as her fellow supervisor Ines, the maid in charge of cleaning, nor did she rule as iron-fisted as her other fellow supervisor Vanessa, the maid in charge of cooking.

But even the “Three Troublemakers” wanted to stay clear of her glare by all costs.

There was a good reason for that. Olsha judged the work of young waiting maids as “good or bad” by observing them inexpressively and wordless.

And if by chance she decided that the “modus operandi of a maid was inappropriate for the inner palace”, she would stay apathetic to the core and calmly report to Supervisory Maid Amanda that someone “failed”.

Olsha’s stance was as following: A job was something you learned by observing and then doing it yourself. Instructions were only necessary once at the beginning. And a superior had the responsibility to distinct between capable and useless subordinators.

Her way of thinking was the complete opposite from Vanessa, whose purpose in life was to drill the skills into the young waiting maids, or Ines, who considered it her greatest obligation to guide the other waiting maids.

Fay and Dolores, part of the infamous "Three Troublemakers" known for their easy-going and lax attitude, also reflexively straightened their backs when receiving such a "scolding" from Olsha.

In the end, the waiting maids, starting with Fay and Dolores, were making an effort to do their job because of it, so it might actually be a good management in itself. Although the young waiting maids on the receiving end could do without it.

"….."

For a while, only the sound of brushes scrubbing over the wet floor could be heard in the bath without anyone saying a word.

That was nothing unusual for Dolores, who was in pretty good control of herself, but even Fay, a bundle of pure energy, was shut up, which definitely spoke in favour of Olsha's self-assertion.

However, Fay wouldn't be called the "Head of the Three Troublemakers" if she could maintain a diligent working morale in silence for long.

She may not be so stupid to neglect her task when she had just been scolded, but she started to get distracted bit by bit. Suddenly, she remembered that she hadn't heard anything of her other roommate Rethe yet, ever since they had started cleaning the bath.

The scatterbrained Rethe certainly was a girl of few words and did things at her own pace, but even so, it was strange that she didn't speak a single word during work.

Carefully continuing with her task, Fay sneaked a peek at the side. Rethe was diligently working her brush while her huge breasts, distinguishably even through her maid clothes, swayed. Because of her drooping eyes, she was usually looking somewhat silly, but now she kept an expression as serious as possible.

(Huh? Why's Rethe so serious?)

Witnessing the unusual behaviour of her roommate, Fay inclined her head puzzled.

And while Fay kept her small head inclined like that, the big-breasted girl with drooping eyes finished cleaning her assigned area and approached her while her footsteps made splishing and splashing sound on the wet floor.

"I'm done with my side, so I'll help you out. Fay-chan, where do you want me to start?"

Usually at her leisure, Rethe now called out to her with a relatively quick tone.

This was definitely weird. Her roommate with the drooping eyes was by no means such the diligent type.

Fay forgot to answer her question and asked back in a whisper.

(Hey, Rethe, what's going on?)

Rethe widened her dropping eyes in reaction to the question, which implied the meaning of "you have never been this serious", and replied disappointed.

"Have you forgotten, Fay-chan? If we don't hurry up with our job, we'll end up last for the 'shopping' at noon."

"AH!?"

"EH!?"

'Shopping'

That one word made Fay, but also Dolores, who was scrubbing nearby, raise an exclamation of surprise.

After a moment of surprise, its meaning dawned on the two of them.

Yes, they had forgotten.

A merchant came to the inner palace once every three months and today was that day.

* * *

A couple of minutes later.

“Hurry up!”

“Fay-chan, Supervisory Maid Amanda will get mad at us when we run in the hallway!”

“It’s all your fault for forgetting your wallet, Rethe! Aw, we’re totally late!”

“In the first place, we would have had all the time in the world if you had not forgotten about today and took the cleaning seriously~”

“Whatever, just hurry up. We have no time to waste!”

Having finished cleaning the bath in a rush, the “Three Troublemakers” were now running down the hallway in the inner palace. Having said that, their opinion of running was actually subjective. For an onlooker, they were “walking at a fast pace” at best.

Despite everything, the three of them were still waiting maids of the inner palace. They would never cross the line. Nonetheless, they sometimes did came pretty close to that line, which earned them the alias “Three Troublemakers”.

Anyway, the three walked down the hallway as fast as their standing as maids of the inner palace allowed them to. At the rear entrance, they changed into their outdoor shoes, then crossed through the courtyard under the dazzling midday sun and headed for a separate building.

The inner palace of the Carpa Kingdom was relatively small, considering the size of the country, but that didn’t mean it only consisted of a single building standing by itself.

Castle walls surrounded several buildings and their yards, the main building, where Zenjirou lived, at its centre. The entirety of it was called the “Inner Palace”.

Right now, Fay and the two other girls were heading towards the building that stood at the very edge of the inner palace.

That house was partly merged with the outer wall of the palace and served as a gate, connecting the isolated inner palace with the outer world. Due to that, the young waiting maids were normally forbidden to go near it unless they had a special reason.

When they quickly crossed through the yard, a group of three young waiting maids was coming back from the house Fay and Co. were heading to, chatting with each other.

“Ah, Karina…”

“Kate…?”

“Christel-chan?”

The three maids ceased their chitchat, as they also noticed Fay and the others approaching quickly, and showed them a different smile than before.

Each of the smiling maids waved their hand and proudly showcased the textiles and small phials of perfumed oil they had bought just now.

In contrast to them, the “Three Troublemakers”: Fay, Rethe and Dolores were all scowling.

They had been beaten to it.

The merchant brought a lot of one-of-a-kind items. Rare items sold well, even in a different world.

Even if he had some “good stuff” in stock, it would have already found their way into the hands of the other waiting maids. And judging by their smug smiles, that event was more than likely.

Moreover, Karina covertly held up her index and middle finger in a “Victory Sign” when she passed by them. Needless to say, the phenomenon of a “Victory Sign” initially didn’t exist in this world, as there wasn’t even the Latin alphabet. Such particulars represented the influence that Zenjirou had on the waiting maids.

“Grr…!”

Since her co-workers looked like the cat that got the cream, Fay felt the urge to yelp at them, but she clearly had other priorities right now.

It would be way too foolish if some other girl stole a march on her again while she snapped at her co-workers, who were already done with their shopping.

"…Let's go, Dolores, Rethe!"

"Ah, wait, Fay. Even if this is the courtyard, you shouldn't be running like the wind. If the Supervisory Maid catches you, you'll be done for!"

"Aw, Fay-chan, wait~"

Dolores and Rethe also quickened their pace, chasing after Fay, who stormed off unfazed.

* * *

When Fay and the others entered the large room, a middle-age merchant with an amble belly gave them an affable smile as he sat cross-legged on top of a red carpet, all kind of articles spread before him.

Textiles in all various colours. Perfumed oil in metal phials as thick as a thump. And accessories such as rings or necklaces.

"Uwah, nice."

With a beaming face, Fay was about to rush over to the merchant at full speed when she noticed the silhouette sitting near the wall at the last moment.

The person glaring at her so strongly that you could feel the tension in the air was no less a figure than Supervisory Maid Amanda, the overall superior of the inner palace.

Her sitting posture on top of the carpet with a straightened back and knees together was as perfect and inhuman as ever. To the point that it made you wonder if even the wrinkles in her clothes obeyed the will of the middle-aged head maid when seated.

Normally she worked in the main building of the inner palace, only concerning herself with instructions for all the waiting maids and the preservation of Zenjirou's comfortable lifestyle. Why was she here now? Because her duties also encompasses the negotiation with the merchants and their oversight.

Right now, there were no more than six soldiers with short spears present, but Supervisory Maid Amanda had the exceptional right to assume command of them in this room.

In face of the fierce glare of the maid, who put her life on the line to keep the order in the inner palace, and the drawn weapons of the armed soldiers under her control, the plump man of middle age left his obvious business smile unchanged, a sign that he wasn't a purveyor to the court for nothing. At least his dauntlessness was remarkable.

The merchant, still sitting on the carpet, smiled at the new arrivals.

"Well, well. It is a pleasure to see you again, Fay-sama, Dolores-sama, Rethe-sama. I believe that I have some items you will fancy this time as well. Please come and take a closer look."

Saying so, he beckoned them to sit down in front of the carpet with the displayed goods.

That he instantly remembered the names of his customers, whom he only got to see once every three months, distinguished him as a capable merchant after all.

Guided by his smile, Fay and the others kneeled on the carpet.

Supervisory Maid Amanda was constantly pressuring them from the other side as if to say "You know what happens when you bring shame on the waiting maids of the inner palace…", so it cramped their "Three Troublemaker" style, but they had been looking forward to the once-every-three-month shopping so much that they could conquer that pressure.

"Oh my, I've never seen a cloth like this. A bit unusual, but still nice."

"You have good eyes, Dolores-sama. That design has recently started to become quite popular in the capital. Despite its popularity, there is a short supply of it, so that piece is the only one I have right now."

"I guess I will get a comb? A few teeth broke on my favourite one the other day."

"Then I recommend this one, Rethe-sama. It has been cut from the carapace of a marine turtle and not only does it look beautiful, but each tooth has been carved meticulously, so it is well-suited for brushing hair."

“Hmm, what should I get? A cute ring or necklace is all good, but I can’t wear it during work…”

“In that case, Fay-sama, how about this hairband? Unlike a ring or necklace, it will not get in the way with your work and you can still look all fashionable.”

As the three of them let their sparkling eyes wander over the displayed articles, the corpulent merchant immediately engaged in some sales talk.

He casually recommended a comb with few teeth to Rethe, who kind of had curly hair, and a hair accessory suitable for even short hair: an Alice band to the shorthaired Fay. Yet another sign that the merchant knew what he was doing.

Thanks to the merchant’s well pronounced words, the three girls gradually forgot about the pressure coming from Supervisory Maid Amanda. They put both their hands on the carpet, leaned forward and watched the goods carefully.

As they were practically on all fours on top of the carpet, greedily stared at the articles and opened their brought wallets to count their money, they hardly looked anything like “refined waiting maids of the inner palace”, but Supervisory Maid Amanda didn’t show the slightest inclination to reprimand them for now.

When all was said and done, Amanda, too, wasn’t as unreasonable as the young waiting maids feared.

She was flexible enough to turn a blind eye to some things during activities like this one, which served as a stress reliever.

“Hey, what do you think looks best?”

Dolores held various clothes against herself and asked Fay and Rethe with an excited voice.

“Ehm, I think the one with the blue line on it looks great.”

“Hmm? The cloth itself may be better, but I do not think it would suit you, Dolores. This brown one would look better on you, in my opinion.”

The enjoyment from satisfying your own desire to buy something with a limited budget existed even in the different world. Then again, the shopping surely would lose all its appeal when you had an unlimited budget and could take everything you wanted.

After wracking their brains for a while, Fay and the other two had finally decided on what to buy. At that moment.

“Yes, thank you very much for your purchase. Please have a look at this next.”

Keeping his friendly smile, the merchant said that and started to line up small phials that shone silver, in front of them.

“What’s this?”

“Perfumed oil?”

“Uwah, so pretty. I only have a silver phial of perfumed oil as a hand-down from my mother~”

Silver phials of perfumed oil. The young waiting maids widened their eyes upon seeing them.

The phials used for perfumed oil were basically classed in the following ascending order: wood, copper and silver. The wooden phial with perfumed oil was mainly for commoners and thrown away after usage. Fay and the others hardly ever owned one of these, since they were lower rank nobles.

However, even with their sense of value, the silver phial was undoubtedly classified as a “high-class item”.

The shrewd merchant deepened his smile as the eyes of the young waiting maids lighted up.

“Please, feel free to touch them. They are filled with the finest perfume oil I could get my hands on. Each phial has a different oil in it.”

Saying so, he urged them by spreading his hands palms up.

“Eh, but…?”

“Our money…”

“Yeah, we spent most of it already…”

The girls mumbled sadly, whereupon the person, who had stayed silent the whole time so far, spoke to them from the side. It was Supervisory Maid Amanda.

“Don’t worry about the money. It’s a present from Zenjirou-sama. You can pick one you like.”

Their reaction to these words was yet again dramatic.

“Eh? No way!?”

“From Zenjirou-sama!?”

“Really!?”

Their earlier depression vanished and they leaned over once more, intensely examining the silver phials of perfumed oil lined up on the carpet.

All the phials were almost of the same size, around as thick as a thumb, but the patterns drawn on them were as manifold as there were stars in the sky.

One had a design that looked like a spider web. Another one had twined ivy vines engraved on it. Yet another one showed the bas-relief of a Water Dragon lifting its head. And so on.

“To put it simply, we have, starting from the right, ‘Rosa Unguis’, ‘Warm Chamomile’, ‘Peppermint’, ‘Red Lily’, ‘Spikenard’, ‘Sweet Horned Dragon’, ‘Blind Snake’, ‘Water Dragon Jewel’ and ‘Sweet Mouse’.”

“You kidding me!? Sweet Horned Dragon?”

“The Water Dragon Jewel is mine!”

“Ah, I love peppermint~ Still, the Sweet Mouse…”

The waiting maids’ interest was focussed on the animalistic perfumed oil. In the eyes of the merchant, that was to be expected.

Picking or even cultivating plants made it relatively easy to make botanical perfumed oil. In contrast to that, hunting animals was dangerous, so animalistic perfumed oil was considered a luxury.

Strictly speaking of favourite fragrances, some people would take botanical perfumed oils over animalistic perfumed oil any day, but when they were offered something they usually couldn’t afford, for free, it was human nature to choose the most expensive one.

In fact, it was pretty unusual that someone would be torn between a rare, expensive high-class item and a common article matching one’s own preference, just like Rethe was right now.

Supervisory Maid Amanda rolled her eyes to the narrow-minded reaction of the young waiting maids, but decided not to speak up “here”.

“Okay, Sweet Horned Dragon it is!”

“The Water Dragon Jewel… It’s too good to be true…”

“I have made up my mind. I will take the peppermint after all~”

In light of the beaming smiles of the excited maids, even Amanda had enough compassion to not lecture them about “manners” and “etiquette” right here. Besides, she shouldn’t really be scolding her subordinates in front of an outsider, unless they took it too far.

Swallowing her words of reproach, Amanda declared to the waiting maids, who just finished their shopping, with a tone as inexpressive as her face.

“I see you three have made your choice. Then do not forget to thank Zenjirou-sama and use it carefully. However, make sure that you use half of it together with the ‘soap’ during baths. Afterwards you report your opinion to Zenjirou-sama. Understood?”

Soap. Zenjirou was most enthusiastic about making it as of late. He somehow had succeeded in making a slimy version, but his self-made soap still somewhat reeked of oil and couldn’t be really used as it was yet.

Hearing the reason behind the present of high-class perfumed oil for everyone, the Three Troublemakers each showed a different reaction.

“Ehh!?”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Eh? Together with the soap~? What a waste~”

However, “Do you understand?”

As they sensed danger from the cold stare of the Supervisory Maid while she asked again,

“Y- Yes.”

“Understood, Supervisory Maid.”

“Yes, Amanda-sama.”, the Three Troublemakers straightened their backs and lowered their heads together.

When the young waiting maids left, the room became quiet at once.

The six guards, standing in each corners of the room and flanking the door, were not allowed to speak here without Amanda’s permission.

So practically, there were only Supervisory Maid Amanda and the middle-age merchant in the room. As long as neither of them opened their mouth, the silence went on forever.

But Amanda seemingly had no intention to keep silent.

“Allow me to express my gratitude once more: Thank you very much.”

Supervisory Maid Amanda made a perfect textbook curtsey, which conjured an amiable smile on the merchant’s face under his deep black moustache.

“Don’t mention it. Instead, it’s a great honour for a merchant to be able to do business with everyone working in the inner palace.”

Saying so, he shook his hand in front of his face, as if to put her off.

“I see.”

Not daring to deny him, the Head Maid Amanda withdrew with these words.

However, she had been right to thank him.

This man was more or less a “purveyor to the court”. While of common birth, his fortune outranked a poor noble. He was a prosperous merchant.

Needless to say, he only dealt with high-class articles. Normally, he would never sell items, which the wallets of the young waiting maids could afford.

To make a reference to modern Earth: It was the same as calling Harry Winston or the manager of a high-class jeweller’s shop like Bvlgari or Cartier to your own house to buy a single jewellery worth under ten-thousand yen. It just wasn’t worth the effort.

Nonetheless, the smile of the merchant was by no means fake.

“I mean really mean it. As a matter of fact, Her Highness Aura regularly purchases at my store, so I’m never in the reds and above all, the deal with Zenjirou-sama got me something worth its weight in gold.”

Something the merchant got from Zenjirou. Namely, things from Earth.

For example: A flat button with four holes.

The Carpa Kingdom only knew of protruding ornamental buttons, so a flat button with four holes had the potential to cause a small culture revolution.

And speaking of flat buttons, they could even start a new fashion style, where buttons were hidden on the inside, and most importantly, a flat button on working clothes “didn’t get in the way”. That alone was already a huge advantage.

The merchant was devising a plan to design a military uniform with flat buttons and sell these to the army in the not so distant future.

Other than that, he was also shown things like screws, the screw-cap of a PET bottle and the pump of a shampoo dispenser. Each of them had the fault that it required advanced skills to reproduce, but once a mass-production was possible, it would undoubtedly become a ground-breaking invention.

If even only one, no matter which, brought about the expected result in the future, he would recover all of his preceding investments in no time.

“I am overcome with joy when this lets me stay in favour with Zenjirou-sama from now on, too, really.”

Not leaking the inner thoughts about his ambitions, the merchant respectfully lowered his head with an attitude as humble as his words.

* * *

Zenjirou was infamous amongst the waiting maids for his fondness of baths.

And not only because they had to trouble themselves to clean and heat up the bath every day.

The main reason was that someone from a different world was suggesting — which was practically an order — his bathing customs to the people of this world, namely the waiting maids, albeit unconsciously.

The act of “washing one’s body with water” was already established in this region, as it was humid and abundant with water resources, but unfortunately, its climate was ridiculous hot.

Due to that, even most noble ladies would rather bathe in “cold” than in “hot” water.

Of course the maids, brought up in such an environment, would show reluctance when they were “suggested” to take warm baths every day.

Nevertheless, it had been a year by now since that bathing culture was “suggested”. The opinion of the waiting maids in regards to bathing in hot water, had slowly started to change.

“Fuh, we’re finally done for today!”

“Ah, I knew it, no one else is around anymore.”

“No surprise. Look how late it has gotten.”

It was late at night. The voices of Fay, Dolores and Rethe resounded in the pitch-black changing room. By this time, their master Zenjirou and Aura had obviously finished their bath already, but the same was true of their fellow waiting maids.

Well, it was self-evident. After all, they had were on “bath duty”.

Just like a cook only ate after all the guests were gone, the people in charge boiler only took a bath after the normal bathing hours were over.

“Okay, let’s get it over with already!”

“Nope. Wash yourself properly. Zenjirou-sama is surprisingly neurotic when it comes to cleanness.”

“You heard her, Fay-chan. It is finally our turn to bathe, so let us take our time and enjoy it.”

Even amidst the darkness Fay and the other two remembered the layout of the room and quickly took off their maid clothes, which were dirty from the soot of the firewood for the boiler. While chit-chatting, they were stark naked in no time.

After she got naked, Dolores then fumbled around for the “LED lantern” standing in the corner of the room and reached out for its switch.

“Ehm… Should be around here. Ah, found it.”

As soon as she said that, the changing room was lit by a dazzling white light.

“Uwah.”

“Ah, right. Zenjirou-sama gave us permission to use this light the other day.”

As the light of the LED lantern was a bit too bright for her eyes that had been used to the darkness, Rethe blinked a few times while she smiled happily.

Just like she had said, Zenjirou had recently allowed the waiting maids to use the LED lantern during their bath. Before, they had entered the bath amidst the illumination of oil pans.

Prior to this, the lantern was used as few as possible, keeping the lifespan of the rechargeable dry cells in mind, but after asking the waiting maids to try out the slimy soap, he had no choice but to revise his decision.

The floor, where they were cleaning themselves, had become extremely slippery, ever since they started to wash their bodies with soap. Slipping inside the bath wasn't to be underestimated. The safety of the waiting maids couldn't even be compared to the lifespan of the batteries after all.

"Okay, I'll carry the light."

Saying so, Dolores covered the front of her naked body with a towel in one hand and lifted up the LED lantern with the other.

"Ah, Dolores, you forgot your perfumed oil."

"Geez, carry it for me, will you. I got both my hands full."

"Fine, fine."

Fay, too, pressed a towel against her body with one hand and grabbed the two small silver phials with perfumed oil with the other.

"Ah, wait for me!"

Falling behind, Rethe trailed them.

Guided by the light of the LED lantern in Dolores' hand, the three disappeared into the bathroom.

The bathroom was right behind the door of the changing room.

A lot of vapour fumed over the large bathtubs and the temperature inside the bathroom was even higher than outside. All the more right now during the hottest season with ongoing sultry nights.

"Ueh."

Thus, it was no wonder that Fay instinctively scowled.

"Aww, Damnit. What an oppressive heat. Let's get it over with already and get out of here."

With these words, Fay quickly headed over to one of the two bathtubs.

"Hey, why're you heading straight for the cold bath? We're going to wash ourselves with warm water first, Fay!"

Fay, with her bare bottom exposed, was scolded like that by Dolores.

Dolores placed the LED lantern on the counter at the wall, then picked up a wooden tub and walked over to the other bathtub.

"She is right, Fay-chan. Come over here. It feels great to wash your body with warm water."

Amongst all waiting maids in the inner palace Rethe was probably the one, who enjoyed the warm baths every day the most. As she had loved taking baths even before she was chosen as a waiting maid for the inner palace, Rethe was one of the few girls, who had adapted themselves to Zenjirou's "suggestion" without any trouble from the very beginning.

"Well, it's not like I can't understand your aversion of hot water in this heat, Fay, but it is a fact that the warm water cleans your hair and body better. So resign yourself and get over here."

On the other hand, Dolores didn't like it either, but recognized the significance of a warm bath as practical.

"Geh, fine. Damn, I'll make this ordeal quick! Or rather, we'll run into the department heads if we don't hurry."

Fay was being reluctant to the end. To begin with, she preferred to bath in cold water and briefly and quickly at that, so it was only natural that she would suffer agony in a hot bath.

"Right. At least in the bath, I want my peace."

Upon Fay's remark, Dolores shrugged her slender and naked shoulders with these words. Each department head, beginning with Supervisory Maid Amanda, had a lot of duties, so they took their baths at a later time. As long as Fay and the others finished their bath orderly, they wouldn't get into the awkward situation of running into their superiors at the bathroom.

Fay plunged a wooden bowl into the wooden tub with the slimy soap and scooped its content.

“Ugh, this stuff really stinks.”

“That’s why Zenjirou-sama bought us expensive perfumed oil to eliminate the smell. C’mon, let’s try it out now.”

“Ehehe, I have ‘peppermint’. I am so excited~”

Each of the three filled their small bowls with the slimy soap, then opened the phials of perfumed oil that they had gotten today.

A person with a sensitive nose would definitely frown now as they opened the three phials of perfumed oil with different smells close at hand all at once.

However, Fay and her friends had no such noses. If anything, they facial features relaxed a bit when the fragrances whitewashed the smell of the oil.

“SNIFF, SNIFF. So this is the ‘Sweet Horned Dragon’ scent. It really gives of a high-class scent.”

“Pshaw! I got the Water Dragon Jewel. It’s said that a fisherman once found a single jewel washed onto the shore and could buy a new house and boat with it. Hmm, I wonder how much you could buy with this phial?”

“Mine is peppermint. Yes, it has a nice fragrance. I really like this smell the best~”

After opening the lids, the three maids brought their faces closer to the phial and soaked themselves in the scent for now.

“Hey, hey, Dolores. How does your Water Dragon Jewel smell? Let me try it.”

“Ah, I want to nose it, too! I am next after Fay-chan!”

“Sure, but lent me yours, too.”

The three of them had each something different, so they circulated it one by one. In that regard, the waiting maids of the different world weren’t all that different from high school girls in Japan. It was practically the same as the scene often witnessed in family restaurants or cafés, where they said: “Hey, hey, let me have a taste of yours”.

For a short while, they exchanged their phials of perfumed oil and enjoyed the three different scents.

Completely forgetting the fact that they were sitting naked in the bathroom, they made merry, claiming “I like this scent” or “that’s not my taste”.

As the small towels were only resting over their groins to let them move their hands freely, Fay’s modest chest, Dolores’ practically flat chest and Rethe’s breasts, which were so voluminous that it made you wonder if they contained her friend’s share as well, were exposed in all their glory.

Who knows how long they sat there and savoured the perfumed oil.

“Oh? What are we amusing ourselves with the perfumed oil for? Today we’re supposed to mask the smell of the soap with it.”

Like always, the first one to return to her senses was Dolores, the most sensible amongst the three.

“Ugh, right…”

“B- But are we really going to mix it with the soap? Such a waste!”

The reason they had procrastinated so far with useless prattling might have been because their minds unconsciously told them it would be a “waste”.

“I agree with you, but we don’t have a say in this matter. C’mon.”

“Uhh, okay.”

“Just a little bit will do for now, right?”

Even while grumbling, the three of them slowly tilted their silver phials of perfumed oil over the wooden bowl filled with the slimy soap.

PLOP. One drop fell down and blended in.

“No good. That did nothing.”

Another drop fell down and blended in.

“Mhh? Maybe a bit more?”

With utmost care and drop by drop, they stirred in the precious perfumed oil.

“Good, the oil smell is gone.”

“Yeah, it is…”

“Aw, it used up so much already…”

By the time the perfumed oil had whitewashed the oily smell of the slimy soap, the content of the phials had decreased by around one-tenth in one sitting.

The large consumption of their precious perfumed oil left the waiting maids with a sad feeling in their hearts, but their sacrifice was by no means in vain.

“Yeah, smells good.”

After Dolores finished washing her body with the soap refined with perfumed oil and rinsing off the foam, she sniffed her own arm and smiled satisfied.

“Well, of course. I would break down crying instead if it didn’t smell good after we used so much of the perfumed oil.”

On the other hand, Fay was still regretting to have used so much of the perfumed oil, so her face only showed a faint smile.

“Yeah, but still, this so-called soap is really amazing. Look, my skin is so smooth when I run my finger over it. And thanks to the perfumed oil, it is not stinky anymore. I would love to use this every day!”

Factoring in her original love for baths, Rethe was completely fascinated by the perfumed oil soap and said so happily while she confirmed the sensation of her own skin.

“Well, don’t let it get you down, Fay. In the end, we got it for free from Zenjirou-sama. Not like we paid for it out of our own pockets.”

“You may be right, but it’s still a waste. I mean, we finally got our hands on some high-class perfumed oil we normally could never afford.”

Although there was still a tinge of regret present in their exchange, the three of them thoroughly rinsed the soap off their body, then headed to the bathtub together.

The three waiting maids lowered their bodies into the bathtub that was so big that it seemed possible to swim in it.

As Fay preferred cold baths over warm ones, she was already giving sidelong glances at the nearby cold bath, but apparently decided to stay with the other two for a while longer.

Laying face-up and resting her head on the edge of the bathtub, Fay voiced the question she suddenly thought of while she unruly kicked her spread legs with splish-splash sounds.

“Ah, reminds me, I wonder what Karina got. She had such a smug face and even showed a V-sign, so it must be something really good. Do you two know anything?”

“Yeah. I only know it from hearsay, but it seems to be ‘Musk’.”

Dolores, her long and straight hair tied up so it wouldn’t get into the water, passed on the gossip she had heard like it was nothing special.

“EHH!? No way. Musk!?”

“You mean, THE musk from the northern continent?”

Fay and Rethe exclaimed in surprise alike.

Musk. That was an aroma gained from a specie of deer called the musk deer. It was commonly agreed that animalistic perfumed oil was generally more high-class than botanic perfumed oils, but the musk aroma was undoubtedly speaking for itself in that regard.

The South Continent mainly had big reptiles living on it, but hardly any large mammals. Consequently, there were no musk deer on it either.

In other words, all musk perfumed oils were imported from another continent without exception.

It was said that one out of ten ships sunk during the overseas trade, so imported goods were extremely expensive by necessity.

Compared to Fay’s “Sweet Horned Dragon” or Dolores’ “Water Dragon Jewel”, the musk perfumed oil was a notch above. Just by wearing it at a high society party, it could become quite the talking point.

“Damn, that little devil Karina! I’m gonna so borrow some from her later!”

As she had gotten hot in her excitement, Fay pushed up her right fist in a jerk and stood up in the bathtub.

“Hey, don’t stand up so suddenly! The water’s splashing all over me! Geez, you’re getting out already?”

Dolores grimaced from the hot water splashed on her face and wiped it. In response, Fay “As if. I’m just getting in the cold bath, because it’s so hot. Otherwise I’m going to die from the rush of blood to my head.” said that and moved over to the cold bath like she had declared.

Now that she had mentioned it, Dolores, too, noticed that her body was feeling rather hot.

She might have a bit of trouble to sleep at night if she were to leave like this. It would be a good idea to follow Fay's example and cool off her body in the cold bath before leaving.

"What about you, Rethe?"

Standing up as well, Dolores asked their other roommate on this occasion, too.

"Yeah, I want to refresh myself in the cold bath, too, but… I cannot shake off that feeling that I have forgotten something."

"And what?"

"It is called forgotten, because you cannot remember it!"

Rethe repeatedly cocked her head left and right — whereby her breasts floating in the water rocked every time — with a somewhat uncertain expression while she said that, but in the end she was unable to resist the charm of a cold bath for her flushed body and she went over to the cold bath together with Dolores.

"Hyah, this rocks!"

"Hmm, guess so. By the way, Fay, Rethe seems to have forgotten something. You know anything?"

"Nope."

"Hey, at least give it some thought before answering. Wait, there you go again with the paddling. If Supervisory Maid Amanda were to see you like that, you wouldn't get away with just…"

Dolores suddenly realized something when she had gotten that far in her sentence and fell silent with a grimace.

"Supervisory Maid Amanda…?"

"Ahaha… Dolores-chan, I… I just remembered what I had forgotten…"

"Now you don't say. I was just coming to a realization myself…"

Dolores, screwing up her face, and Rethe, smiling dryly, were unexpectedly looking in the same direction.

Namely, at the door connecting the bathroom with the changing room.

"What's gotten into you two?"

Fay, the only one not comprehending the situation, was still splashing around with her doggy paddling.

The faint sounds coming from behind the door to the changing room were surely not their imagination. Since their co-workers, the other young waiting maids, had already finished their bath, there was only one culprit left for the noise.

At this rate, Fay's waiting maid days were in danger. Dolores couldn't be that heartless to her roommate, so she gave her a warning with a sigh.

"Fay, here's some friendly advice: Stop swimming around and stay put. It's too late to escape now."

"Eh? Escape?"

It happened when Fay put down her legs and inclined her head puzzled.

The door opened with a clatter and several silhouettes entered the bathroom.

"Oh! I knew someone was here from the clothes in the changing room, but it's you guys, huh."

"Good grief. I will not tell you how to spend your free-time, but you have an early morning tomorrow again, so have a bit more moderation, will you."

"Oh come on, Ines. Doing some naked bonding with the young ones is important as well. It's been a while, so why don't we have them wash our backs?"

Led by Supervisory Maid Amanda, Ines, the cleaning department head, and Vanessa, the cooking department head, followed inside. And further in the back stood Emilia, the gardening department head, and Olsha, the bathing department head, wordlessly.

All senior maids in charge of the inner palace were assembled here.

“O- Oh, right. With the soap and stuff, it got pretty late…”

Fay finally grasped the current situation, too.

“Pardon me for leaving first.”

Dolores gave the appearance of being polite.

“Ahaha… I, I will excuse myself now, Supervisory Maid.”

And Rethe attempted to leave somehow. With a ray of hope, the three young waiting maids got out of the cold bath, lowered their heads quickly and made a stab at the exit.

However, there was no way the Head Maid would let them leave in peace.

“Hold it right there! Now that we are all here, I will verify if you can wash yourselves properly. After all, you may be called upon by Zenjirou-sama any time.”

“Indeed. This specially extends to you, Fay. You have a tendency to find it bothersome to care for your body and hair.”

“Well, it’s a done deal. There’s no harm in learning how to take care of your body while you’re young. Steel yourselves and come over here.”

After being told that by the group of superiors, they had no option but to do so.

“…Yes.”

“Very well.”

“Please take care of us…”

Heaving heavy sighs, the three troublemakers headed determined over to their beckoning seniors.

The enjoyable bath time with just the young waiting maids had turned into a tense bath guidance from the department heads.